

**Infinite
Dendrogram:
Volume 5**

Sakon Kaidou

VISIT...

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Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite 4endrogram

5. Those Who Bind the Possibilities



***“Save your
desperate
counters for
a cooler
sceene,
goofus!”***

▲ No one saw
the moment
that man
appeared
before Ray.

Infinite
4D Program
5. Those Who Bind the Possibilities

Sakon Kaidou
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After all, he was facing the very reason why he was here — his ultimate goal for coming to this place.

**“FRANK-
LIIIIINN!”**

“Frank...lin...!”

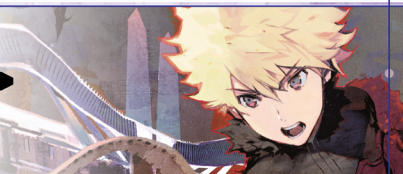
Ray had lost his right arm and even let go of Nemesis, yet he still dashed towards Franklin.

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes/Lucius Holmes

An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creation, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.

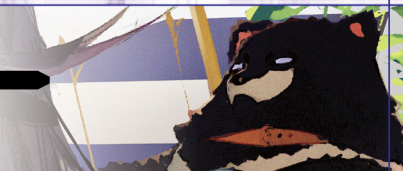


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Examination Chapter: ■■■■

■■■■■■■■'s Analysis

Central arena, audience seating, ■■■■ ■■■■■■, ■■■■■■■■

“Lad, did you see that?! That kid’s amazing!” the middle-aged tian man seated next to me cried.

“Yes, he truly is!” I enthused.

As I gave the appropriate response, I analyzed the broadcast. The moment it had appeared, I’d changed my thought process from personal to tactical. The Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, had started the broadcast in order to make the kingdom’s tians despair. However, the newbie young man called “Ray Starling” — a surname I knew very well, by the way — had turned it around and emerged victorious, bringing about the opposite of Franklin’s intended result.

If he’d committed this act of terrorism just to make the kingdom lose faith in its Masters, it was safe to say that he’d failed, but Franklin still had some pawns on the board. Needless to say, he wasn’t out of plans just yet.

I began forming an image of the overall situation, starting with the numbers of pawns on both sides of Franklin’s Game.

First, I went through Gideon’s forces.

No. 1 in the duel rankings, “Endless Chain,” was sealed. No. 4, “Black Raven,” and no. 8, “Vagrant Golden Sea,” were both bound by the barrier around the central arena.

No. 6, “Kamen Rider,” and no. 7, “Raging Blaze,” had been defeated in battle.

No. 2, “Monster Cat Mansion,” no. 3, “Guillotine,” and no. 5, “Bone-Eater” were not present. No. 9 and below weren’t all that relevant to the situation at hand.

The barrier’s disappearance would release nos. 1, 4, and 8, which could greatly influence the flow of the battle. In fact, no. 1 was capable of killing Franklin all by his lonesome.

The non-ranking Masters outside the arena were gradually decreasing in number, but many of those incapacitated at the western gate were only bound by the Frozen debuff, meaning that they could re-join if it was removed.

There was also the person who I assumed to be the Superior Killer. I’d lost all trace of them, but I was absolutely certain that it was due to stealth abilities rather than death.

The newbies that had left the arena had lost half of their number, with only about twelve still alive. However, Ray Starling — the newbie who'd achieved the most — was badly injured, making it questionable whether he could continue fighting.

Then there was Franklin's battle potential. The Masters he'd hired were gradually being purged, and the same applied to the monsters released unto the city. However, it was glaringly obvious that he had more in store, making it entirely possible that the numbers on his side could increase.

The three characters thought to be his heavy-hitters had been taken care of.

Veldorbelt, the one who'd killed "Kamen Rider," had in turn been killed by the Superior Killer. Hugo Lesseps, the one who'd sealed "Raging Blaze" and many other Masters, had been captured by the newbie called "Rook." And the Ray Starling Killer, the monster that had greatly damaged the Royal Guard, had, ironically, been killed by Ray Starling.

Though the number of pawns on the board clearly wasn't all that great, all the ones sealed within the barrier and the unknown monsters Franklin still had in store made it hard to predict which side would win. And I wasn't even including the pawns that could destroy the board itself.

By that, I meant the joker Franklin had placed beneath this arena and the three abnormally powerful individuals sealed in here — myself included.

I looked over the stage, eyeing the opposite side of the arena. By straining my eyes a bit, I could see a woman with a porcupine on her knees. Her eyes were directed at the broadcast, and I couldn't tell whether she was amused or bored.

Suddenly she shifted her gaze towards me, causing our eyes to meet. Though her expression was devoid of any killing intent, I felt as if it came with the question, "You wanna go?"

If I responded to the challenge and fought her, we would bring about far more death and destruction than all the battles so far *combined*.

Right now, I had no intention of becoming the cause of such a calamity, so I simply shook my head. With that, she seemed to lose all interest in me and returned her gaze back to the broadcast.

This is the first time we've met, but so far, she gives me the impression of a wild beast, I thought.

Anyway, with that curious exchange, it became obvious that she wouldn't make a move unless provoked.

Besides the two of us, there was one other abnormally powerful individual here. He would make his move as soon as whatever was

holding him back was gone, meaning that the climax of this event was near.

I can't wait until he enters the scene, I thought. He's probably even stronger than he was the last time we fought.

What was about to happen would be far more intense than tonight's Clash of the Superiors or Franklin's Game.

"It's your turn now... Shu," I murmured.

Those words escaped my mouth, confusing the tian man next to me. I lied my way out and began waiting for the time to come.

Chapter One: Plan C

Duel city Gideon

Gideon was roaring with cries of joy — cheers over Ray and the Royal Guard's victory.

With the defeat of the RSK, the remote controlling the monster-releasing devices had been destroyed as well. Even after the time limit had passed, there was no sign of any monsters being released in Gideon. Thus, the city's people became overwhelmed with joy and praised the victors.

The traitors working for Franklin, on the other hand, either became upset by the failure or scorned Franklin for his mess-up.

Though the reactions were mostly split between those two, there were a few exceptions. One of them was Hugo. Being one of Franklin's people, he was aware of Franklin's plans and knew what the man would do next. That perspective also applied to a few of the veterans fighting or merely observing the situation.

They knew that *it wasn't over yet*.



Jeand Grasslands

Using optical means to hide himself, Franklin observed what was happening in the Jeand Grasslands.

"Well... damn. Seriously," he muttered while looking down at the place where the RSK had vanished. His tone contained suppressed rage, irritation, and a hint of self-derision.

Tonight, he'd started the plan he'd formed as a member of Dryfe Imperium's prime minister faction. At the same time, though, he'd challenged Ray Starling to a revenge match.

Franklin loathed defeat more than anything else, and he wouldn't find peace until he made anyone who won against him experience an even greater loss. That was how he'd broken the spirit of the Master who'd killed him, and that was exactly how he'd planned to get back at Ray for ruining his plan and indirectly defeating him.

He'd intended to have the fine-tuned monster defeat this newbie and make him aware of his powerlessness when all the monsters ravaged Gideon. However, the actual result of the revenge match had been nothing like that.

The RSK, the 100,000,000 lir Pure-Dragon-class monster he'd

designed specifically to kill Ray Starling, was turning into particles of light.

Franklin had *lost to him again*.

It was an unexpected result, but he could've predicted it if he'd considered several factors.

Franklin began thinking what he had to do in order to win against Ray Starling with the handicap he'd set for himself. That was about the only thing on his mind while looking at the place where the RSK had vanished.

Though he ruined my plan and defeated me, he's still a newbie, he had thought yesterday. Going all-out on him would be immature. Not to mention that it's a waste of resources. Then there's the fact that he helped out one of my people, so... All right, I'll handle him with a single Pure-Dragon-class monster.

Franklin slowly shook his head and sighed. "I was such an idiot for thinking that yesterday," he said in a voice thick with anger and self-derision. He regretted his ever choosing to set a handicap, and tried to think of what he should've done instead, but in the end, he believed the result would've been the same regardless of what he did. That was because his opponent was Ray Starling.

This was the person who'd defeated a Demi-Dragon Worm — a match for a high-rank job — while being level 0.

Then, a few days later, he'd faced and defeated the UBM known as "Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda."

On the day that followed, he'd defeated the head of the infamous Gouz-Maise Gang and felled the UBM born out of the group's grudge: Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

And just now, he'd emerged victorious against his natural enemy, the RSK.

The newbie had already brought about a number of miracles, and Franklin had a hunch that he could do it again. The memory of that hunch mixed with the reality of his defeat made his thoughts go into disarray.

I don't want to lose a single time, yet I've lost twice now. It happened even with my countermeasures in place. I can't stomach this. I won't allow it.

Gradually, his verbal thoughts became emotions. A staggering lack of words overwhelmed his head before gathering and forming a single sentence.

"I'll go all out... and *kill him*."

At that moment, Franklin, the Superior from Dryfe Imperium, reached a certain conclusion. His greatest enemy wasn't the imperator faction's King of Beasts, the field marshall faction's Hell General, any of the four Superiors from the kingdom or any of the nine Superiors

from Caldina's pride and joy that was Sefirot.

It was *him*.

The newbie known as Ray Starling was Franklin's smallest, yet greatest, nemesis. Thus, he decided to defeat him using all he had.

Next time, I'll grind him into dust using my anti-Superior monster: Mechanic God Dylan, he thought furiously.

However, that was something to do another time. MGD still wasn't complete, and Franklin had other priorities. His revenge match against Ray Starling was purely a personal thing. He still had a role to fulfill as a Superior sponsored by the prime minister.

With that in mind, he regained his composure and sprung into action, starting with...



By the skin of his teeth, Ray had defeated the RSK and announced his victory to the people of Gideon.

Following that moment, he reached his limit, lost consciousness, and fell flat on his back.

"Ray!" Nemesis shouted his name as she returned to her human form and supported his body. Liliana, Sir Lindos, and several other Paladins of the Royal Guard gathered in Ray's vicinity.

"Ray, are you all right?! Force Heal!" shouted Liliana as she cast a healing spell.

"Those with spare MP, you take turns healing him and the incapacitated knights!" Lindos gave his orders. "Franklin is hiding right now, so the rest of you, search for him and Her Highness Elizabeth! Don't let that man escape!"

"Understood!" the knights replied in unison before scattering.

A small number of them stayed with Ray. One was Liliana, who healed him with a pained expression on her face.

"We can restore his health, but..." she said while looking at Ray's left arm. It was Burned so badly that the debuff merely upgraded to Charred. Even high-rank healing magic would have a hard time with such grave injury-based debuffs. Defeating the natural enemy of all Paladins had caused him to pay a heavy price.

Thankfully, Ray was a Master and thus could be completely restored by simply getting the death penalty and respawning once the time had passed. Whether he'd be willing to take this course of action, however, was a different matter entirely.

"For now, just keep him alive, please," said Nemesis. "Ray doesn't want to make his exit just yet."

"I understand," replied Liliana as she and the other knights healed Ray.

A moment later, the sound of clapping reached their ears.

Surprised, they looked for the source and found it in the hologram projected into the sky.

Though they were unaware of this, it was displaying the exact same thing as the ones projected all across town. Right now it showed Franklin, smiling so widely it seemed unnatural.

“Did you see that, dear audience?” he asked. “The monster I’ve created has been destroyed. How sad. Truly a pity. Even so, I believe the Paladins who pulled it off deserve a round of applause. So here, clapclapclapclap.”

Clapping was exactly what he did. However, not a single soul joined him in that. In fact, the viewers who had been cheering just a few moments ago had turned silent upon seeing him.

“So yeah,” he continued. “Congratulations. 251 seconds have passed since the time limit and uh, it’s pretty clear that the remote is destroyed. The monsters don’t seem to have been released, after all.”

Franklin placed his hand on his forehead and shook his head in a disappointed manner. Then he reached into his pocket with a blank expression...

“Lo, this right here is a spare!”

He pulled out a remote, just like the one consumed by the RSK.

“You wretch!” shouted Nemesis, the anger in her tone all too palpable.

“Hahahahahah! The folk on the scene all look like, ‘What was the point of the last battle?’ I’m guessing the rest of the audience feels the exact same way.” Ignoring Nemesis’s words, Franklin continued speaking in a smug manner. “The battle up until now was just a sideshow — a revenge match. Come on, now. Stuff breaks, you know? Making spares is the obvious thing to do, don’t you think?”

A grin formed on his face yet again.

“By the way, this one works without a timer, so... I’ll just press it. Beepbeepbeepbeep.” With that, he nonchalantly activated the devices, releasing the 500 monsters in Gideon.

“Franklin!” Nemesis roared in anger, but again, he paid no heed.

“Hahahahahah! You were a pretty great sideshow. Sure, I didn’t like the result all too much, but seeing you now makes it kinda worth it. If only Ray was awake, too. I’d love to see his reaction.” Franklin laughed mockingly.

Liliana glared at him, told her subordinates to continue healing Ray, and stood up.

“Well, hi there, your excellency miss vice commander,” Franklin said cheerfully. “You’re gonna go help the citizens? Or are planning to defeat me? You think you can do that when you’re hurt all over? That’s some impressive perseverance... Anyway, I’m not having that. Call — DGP, KOS.” Franklin raised the Jewel on his right hand and

summoned two monsters, both of which appeared right next to Nemesis.

One of them was Dino-Earth Giga Phalanx: a pachycephalosaurus-like dinosaur emitting a red aura.

The other was a King-Size Oxygen Slime: a blue Slime just like the ones he'd released in the arena, only several times bigger.

"Th-They're..." Nemesis muttered as her intuition told her something. The two monsters before her were far stronger than the RSK, the creature they'd just worked so hard to defeat. In fact, they were actually more menacing than Gouz-Maise, their foe from yesterday.

"What? You find it strange?" asked Franklin. "I have the Superior Job of Giga Professor, and I am the owner of a Superior Embryo. You didn't actually believe that the RSK was the only monster I had or that it was the strongest, right? In fact, out of all my special creations, he was among the weaker ones. While he was Pure-Dragon-tier, these are a match for Masters with battle-oriented Superior Jobs and Legendary-tier UBMs."

Nemesis and the Royal Guard were at a loss for words. Franklin continued.

"Surely you saw this coming, right? The only reason I used the RSK was because Ray had been able to kill a Demi-Dragon Worm, and going a step up in terms of tier seemed like the reasonable thing to do. I spent the appropriate amount of money to make sure everything was accounted for and intended to thoroughly break his spirit. But the result... well, I lost again." He heaved a long sigh as his smile faded. "Ray won against me two times out of two. I swear that I'll get back at him for this humiliation."

Nemesis stayed mute. She realized that, with the RSK, Franklin had been partially playing around. Though everyone had believed him to be immature for singling out a newbie, he'd still been somewhat considerate. However, now that he'd lost two times, Franklin had no such sentiments left.

A Superior — one of the few strongest players — now saw Ray as an enemy.

"Still, I have no intention to fail tonight's plan," he said. "Anyway, let's see how the city's doing. The monsters there are weaker than these babies, but I did throw in a few troublesome ones and... Hm...?"

After looking in the city's direction, Franklin tilted his head in a puzzled manner.

Nemesis could easily tell what had him so confused.

Gideon is too quiet.

For a city being ravaged by 500 monsters, it was far too silent.

By straining their ears, they could hear some sounds of battle, but

they were strangely infrequent.

“...Did it only release a part of them?” Franklin pressed the button again, but Gideon still remained the same. “The remote is functioning properly. That means the problem is on the other en...”

Suddenly, he remembered something.

Tonight, he’d encountered a certain person who could easily take care of the many devices hidden in the city. It was a person clad in a black mist which made it hard to tell whether it was a he or a she.

The person’s name was...



A certain place in duel city Gideon

“Oh, I’m so glad I made it,” a certain person muttered while looking up at the projection above.

Her name was Marie Adler. She was sitting at the edge of an alley to take a breather.

Right next to her, there was a bag filled to the brim with devices with Jewels fixed inside of them.

Each and every one of them were broken.

They were the monster-releasing devices Franklin had placed all over the city.

After fighting the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell, Marie had run around the city collecting them. Being the crux of the plan, these devices had had to be hidden until it was time. Because of that, in addition to their long-distance monster-releasing function, Franklin had also equipped them with a high-quality Conceal ability. That was the reason why they had been able to remain in the city for a few days without anyone noticing. However...

“Sadly for him, I happen to be as good at finding as I am at hiding,” she said.

Being a Death Shadow — a Superior Job from the onmitsu grouping — Marie excelled at Conceal. She could not only masterfully hide herself, but discover those in hiding as well.

Marie’s Conceal Perception skill was maxed out. It was what had allowed her to see through the Conceal on Night Lounge, the monster Franklin had used to escape.

During her search, however, she’d noticed the many Concealed monster-releasing devices littered across the city. Thus, after her fight, she’d taken it upon herself to gather and break as many of them as possible.

In the end, she’d taken care of 403 devices — more than 80% of the total.

Considering that a number had already released themselves ahead of time, it was hard to imagine that there were many left.

This result certainly wasn't *all* thanks to her. The Paladins' battle against the RSK had bought her time to minimize the harm.

This also marked a turning point in the situation: the Masters high-rank or above were now capable of leaving the arena. The only thing that had been holding them back was the potential of releasing monsters upon attacking the barrier. With that gone, they were now free to break it and retaliate against Franklin.

His plan had completely collapsed.



However, some veterans were more than aware of just how abnormal Superiors could get.

They knew just how tenacious and meticulous Franklin was.

Thus, they were absolutely certain of one thing:

It's not over yet.



Duel city Gideon, not far from the western gate

"...Oh, so *that's* what's happening here. Hahah. Now ain't that funny. You all just keep ruining my plans. How... disheartening."

As he listened to Franklin, Hugo became painfully aware that the plan had failed.

"...So it's over," he muttered to himself.

Hugo was currently sitting on the ground, virtually unable to move. Rook and the others had bound him when he'd become Charmed. The debuff had canceled Cyco's merging with the Magingear, and she was now at his side, Charmed and unable to do anything. As long as she was in that state, Hugo had no hope of breaking out of this situation.

Looking away from the broadcast, he examined the situation around him.

He was no longer in the area right before the western gate.

Rook and the three girls with him had all moved to a place where they could see Franklin's broadcast, and they'd taken Hugo with them. By Rook's decision, he hadn't been given the death penalty yet.

"Ray defeated that monster," said Rook. "The devices, too, were taken care of by... someone."

Though he didn't say so, Rook was completely certain that the culprit was Marie. Hugo, on the other hand, was completely unaware of her existence, so all he took from this was the reality of the plot's failure.

"It appears so," Hugo said. "Heh, Plans A and B have both failed... The plot is as good as over."

I guess this will mean an all-out war between the kingdom and the imperium, he thought sadly.

“So I failed to prevent the calamity and ended up simply supporting the tragedy,” he muttered in self-derision. “If I’d known it would go down like this, I would’ve had ‘him’ reconsider, and... What?”

Hugo noticed that Rook was looking between him and Franklin’s projection with a puzzled expression on his face.

“You just mentioned ‘Plans A and B,’” Rook said. “Can I have their details? They’ve already failed, right?”

“...Very well.” After a moment of hesitation, Hugo began his explanation, which sounded somewhat like a sinner’s confession. “For Plan A, we sealed the Masters that came to see The Clash of the Superiors in the central arena and kidnapped the princess. Then we threatened to release the monsters to force them to stay put inside. The low-level Masters that could leave the barrier and those that weren’t inside from the start were then handled by player killers, meaning me and Veldorbell... he’s a master with a Superior Job in our clan. Our leader was then meant to escape from Gideon with the princess, which would make the kingdom’s tians lose faith in the kingdom’s Masters. And that was pretty much the whole plan.”

“...Not exactly thorough, if you ask me,” said Rook.

“Indeed.”

“The part about keeping the Masters in by making it so that damage to the barrier releases monsters is a huge flaw. After all, as proven by us, low-levels can pass freely.”

“That was part of the plan,” Hugo said. “Apparently, it was necessary that we fight the kingdom’s Masters and defeat them in a one-sided battle. Low-levels are the most suitable for this purpose.”

It wouldn’t be enough for everything to end when the Masters were sealed and rendered incapable of doing anything. To break the kingdom’s spirit, it would have been necessary for the imperium’s forces to gain a flawless victory against the kingdom’s Masters. Thus, it had been optimal for them to be as weak as possible, and that limitation on the barrier had been perfect for this. In the end, however, Plan A had completely failed because of anomalies such as Ray and Rook.

“The way you handled the Masters that weren’t inside the barrier was very sloppy, too,” said Rook. “The plan would’ve completely failed if a Superior with no interest in the fight had just hung around town, right?”

“The possibility was there, yes,” replied Hugo. “But as you’re aware, that didn’t actually happen. Not to mention that we had Cyco — the bane of many Masters here — and the King of Orchestras,

Veldorbell.”

Franklin had displayed a lot of cunning by positioning Veldorbell in Gideon days before the plan had begun. He'd had him act as nothing but a Master street performing in the central plaza, and soon enough, most of the people in town had become familiar with him and his band. Even the fact that he had his Legion Embryo out all the time had been taken for granted.

When the plan began tonight, many of the kingdom's Masters hadn't recognized him as an enemy, giving him a perfect opportunity for surprise attacks.

Though his stats were significantly lower than those of battle jobs, the bonuses from his Superior Job skills greatly empowered the attacks of his Bremen. And since they all moved at sonic speed, only AGI-focused Superior Jobs could ever hope to evade them.

The Masters he'd defeated had been far more numerous than those Frozen by Hugo, and most of them had been reduced to dust before even getting the chance to realize what had happened to them.

If the Superior Killer hadn't been an AGI-based Superior Job with the Danger Perception skill, there was a high chance that she would've died from his first attack.

“So,” said Rook, “I assume Plan B was what you had in store in case the Masters in the barrier turned impatient and just broke out, or if someone made it through the obstacles and got to Franklin — which is what's happened now.”

“Yes.” Hugo nodded. “Plan B was basically the release of all the monsters regardless of the remaining time. The ensuing chaos would have allowed our leader to escape with the princess. This was also what would've happened if ‘he’ had been caught off guard and been given the death penalty.”

Franklin's claim that it all would've ended if he died was nothing but a lie. It would've actually acted as the trigger to release the monsters, which was a testament to his meticulousness and troublesome nature.

“Regardless of what transpired...” Hugo said before cutting his words short. He couldn't bring himself to add that “...the leader had no scenario in which he didn't release the monsters.”

However, Rook was practically able to read minds, so he could infer Hugo's words even if he stayed silent.

“If he wanted to break the country's spirit, he could've done something far more effective than merely kidnapping the princess,” Rook commented.

“You're probably right,” said Hugo. “However, ‘he’ promised me that he designed the monsters to only attack Masters. He wanted to limit tian casualties, too.”

“...Oh, I see how it is,” Rook responded with a short sigh.

“What do you mean?” Hugo asked, thoroughly puzzled.

“I’ve been wondering about this, but you saying ‘he wanted to limit tian casualties’ makes it all clear.”

“Makes *what* clear?” Hugo couldn’t understand what Rook was wondering about and what kind of answer he’d found.

In fact, Hugo was actually the *only one* who couldn’t make sense of this. Basically...

“I now understand why you’re so blind when it comes to Franklin. You actually believe that he’d never massacre tians, don’t you?”

...it was a question regarding Hugo’s perception.

Before, during, and even after the plan, Hugo had continued to believe in Franklin, and that was exactly what Rook was curious about.

“You... y-you think I’m blind?” asked Hugo.

“Yes,” answered Rook. “You probably don’t think that, but to my eyes, that man’s a person who can easily start a massacre.”

“He’d never. He’s like me! He also understands that tians aren’t just NPCs, but entities close to living beings... no, actual living beings! He’d never do something that vile!”

“So what if he *does* understand that? Does that get in the way of him starting a massacre?” Rook demanded.

Being told that Franklin was the type of person to commit such atrocities wasn’t something Hugo could stomach. “He’d never do that! I... I’ve known him for a long time! Don’t act like you understand him better than me!”

His anger made apparent, Hugo shouted at Rook, who replied with a cold gaze and his own words.

“That’s true. I only know Franklin through word of mouth and this incident. I’ve never even talked to him directly. Even so, I can assert that my assumption is correct.”

“Why?!”

“It’s *because* I don’t know him. By simply lining up what he’s done so far, it’s pretty easy to predict that he’s prepared something even more sinister. Anyone would assume that much. You’re probably the only one who doesn’t.”

“Gh...!” Hugo gasped in response.

Rook’s conclusion was based in nothing but reality.

Franklin had participated in the war. He had killed many soldiers by feeding them to his monsters, and had even killed the king of this country that way. And tonight, he’d kidnapped the princess and tried to destroy the city in order to make the kingdom’s Masters look bad. It was only natural to assume that a person like that would do something even more atrocious, and Hugo was alone in not thinking

so.

“You say you’ve ‘known him for a long time,’ huh?” Rook continued. “I’m sure you have. It’s why you don’t see him as he is right now. You’re observing him through a filter, much like the mother of a criminal. ‘My boy would never do such a thing,’ and all that.”

“Gh...!” If he wasn’t bound, Hugo would’ve most likely tried to punch him. Unable to do so, however, he simply continued sitting as Rook stared at him with the coldest eyes.

That was when Babi talked to Rook through telepathy. “You’re very harsh on him, Rook.”

That was a very natural comment to make. After all, the boy known as Rook was generally very courteous and could get along with just about everyone, so it was the first time Babi had ever seen him be so cold and judgmental towards someone.

“I’m only this candid with those I can’t bear to watch,” he thought in response.

To Rook, Hugo was the opposite of Ray, the person he wanted to observe as thoroughly as possible. His standards regarding this were extremely vague. However, the fact remained that watching Hugo filled him with a strong desire to make sure he didn’t continue as he was, so he pointed out his mistakes in a really harsh manner.

“You know what, since you believe in Franklin so much... let me give you a simple prediction,” Rook said.

“A prediction?”

“Franklin is about to say something vile,” Rook said with certainty in his voice as he looked at the broadcast.

A moment later, Franklin — who’d seemingly been despairing over Plan B’s failure — suddenly raised his head. On his face, there was a full smile.

“Oh man, this is annoying. I can’t believe both Plan A and B have failed... The big and scary meatheads are probably gonna leave the arena soon, so... I guess I’ll have to start on Plan C.”

“...Huh?” Hugo voiced his puzzlement. That was about the only thing he could do upon hearing Franklin’s words.

All the Masters who’d participated in Franklin’s plot were just as confused as him. After all, none of them had been told about the existence of a “Plan C.”

The only one who had known its contents was Franklin.

“Plan C for ‘Crisis...’ Total annihilation of Gideon by 56,826 *monsters*.”

And its contents were, as Rook had predicted, absolutely vile.

Chapter Two: Those Who Bind the Possibilities

Jeand Grasslands

Franklin's words made the surrounding air freeze.

Nemesis, Liliana, Sir Lindos, and the other Royal Guard members failed to fully understand what Franklin had just said.

"F-Five... eh?"

"Wasn't it 500...?"

"56,826 monsters? Hmph. Isn't that a bit too large a number to work as a bluff?" Nemesis asked, the worry in her voice all too apparent. She knew exactly what he was saying, but it was clear that she simply couldn't believe that he was capable of that. "You planned to release just 500 into the city. Do you really expect us to believe you can increase that number a hundredfold?"

Nemesis wanted to think he was lying, and most of those in and outside the city likely shared her sentiment.

In response, Franklin simply nodded and widened his smile. "It's just that I couldn't make more than 500 monsters with the *useless* 'attacks only Masters and buildings' trait. They cost me quite a lot, though."

In other words, he had been able to prepare far more monsters that targeted all creatures, and that number was above 50,000. The 500 monsters in the devices in Gideon had only been made out of consideration for one of his own: Hugo.

"But now that plan A and B are bust, I can't allow myself to care about appearances," he continued.

That word made Nemesis realize something. "Plan...!"

It was clear what she meant.

Plans A, B, and C — the more Franklin failed, the longer the kingdom held against his schemes, the more intense and destructive the plans became.

Franklin had intended to end it with plans A and B. As he always said, he'd had no intention of losing. However, he had devised plans just in case he was defeated, and he'd done it all for a single purpose.

"Oh man, what a shaaame," Franklin mocked. "*It never would've come to this if you'd all just given up.*"

All to break the country's spirit.

All to make its people painfully aware that their fruitless struggle

would only increase the casualties.

That was why he'd gone out of his way to create other plans in case his earlier ones failed.

"Find Franklin! Put the wretch to death before he can summon the monsters from his Jewel!" Sir Lindos roared, causing the Royal Guard to begin desperately searching.

Defeating Franklin before he summoned his monsters would mark the end of the crisis. The fact that the two monsters from before had appeared right next to them must have made Liliana assume that Franklin was nearby.

However...

"Heh heh heh. 'From his Jewel'? Come on now, if I got them on the board by Calling each one separately, morning would come before I could even get to 10,000." Franklin formed an indomitable smile and snapped his fingers. "Optic Camouflage — cancel."

A moment later, the world was shaved off, much like the scales on a fish. An area of the nightly darkness crumbled, revealing whatever was hiding there.

It was an object so large that it could make people forget the fact that it was ever hidden. Its silhouette was reminiscent of a mix of a box, a dragon, and a spider. Countless smokestacks were extending out of a cube that had sides reaching a length of a kilometel.

The inorganic cube was fixed with a large, elaborate head of a dragon. It also had eight arachnid legs extending to its sides. It was abnormal in terms of both size and design.

Everyone besides Franklin was immediately puzzled as to why they'd failed to notice an existence *this* unnatural. Franklin stood at the top of the abnormal structure and introduced it.

"First time seeing this? Well, you'd better remember it, since this is my Superior Embryo. Type Plant Fortress — Magic Beast Factory, Pandemonium."

"Superior Embryo" was a term used in reference to the Embryos that had evolved to the seventh form, the apex of Embryos.

Gideon's inhabitants were highly familiar with the term thanks to their champion Figaro, the Over Gladiator. However, before the overwhelming abnormality of Franklin's Pandemonium, that familiarity did little to help their state of mind. It was simply far too unlike the Superior Embryos Figaro and Xunyu had used in their match.

"This bad boy wasn't evolved during the war, but yeah, this is my Superior Embryo," Franklin said gleefully. "His unique abilities are monster production, as I'm sure you're all aware, and monster transportation."

With that, the large, mystical fortress opened its mouth. Within it,

there were countless dim lights. They were eyes — the sinister gazes of the numerous monsters about to be unleashed.

“All right, let’s start with 5,000 of my Suicide Series,” Franklin said in a casual tone, causing a slope to go down from the dragon’s mouth.

5,000 monsters grouped up and began marching, all for the purpose of annihilating Gideon.



■■■ ■■■■■, ■■■■■■

Superior Embryos were the apotheosis of Embryos.

Though that was true for all of them, the path they took to get to that point and what they became upon reaching it differed on a person-to-person basis.

For example, there was the one belonging to Over Gladiator, Figaro: the heart-shaped Superior Embryo with a name still unknown to me. It and its Master were literally one, and its unique ability was a very simple thing — the enhancement of the items he had equipped.

Basic as it was, however, thanks to the enhancement proportional to battle time, the enhancement inversely proportional to the number of equipped items, and a *third type of enhancement* — the ace up his sleeve — he was theoretically able to improve his equipment without limit. And that was enough for this Superior Embryo to be considered an apex among Embryos.

Then there was Tenaga Ashinaga — the prosthetic limbs Superior Embryo belonging to Xunyu, the Master Jiangshi. They could stretch at the speed of sound and had durability matching that of Ancient Legendary-tier special rewards. Though Xunyu had an END-focused caster job, this Embryo gave her the potential to match AGI-focused Superior Jobs in terms of close-quarter fighting ability.

Then there was her Embryo’s ultimate skill — the space-bending attack capable of destroying the organs of and killing targets far in the distant horizon, even if they weren’t in battle.

Thus this Superior Embryo was, without a doubt, another apex among Embryos.

Then there was the Superior Embryo belonging to the Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.

It was a Plant Fortress: a Type derived from the basic category of Type Castle, and the only one of its kind so far. It had two main unique abilities: monster production and storage.

Monster production was again split into two types: mass production and the creation of specially-made monsters using the ultimate skill.

The former was the one relevant to this situation, and the skill it

used was simply called “Monster Mass Production.”

As far as I was aware, it was a skill that empowered the researcher grouping’s Monster Creation skill and allowed the production of multiple monsters at the same time. Of course, Franklin needed materials for this, but I’d been informed that it was entirely possible for it to produce 1,000 monsters per day.

The skill also came with the effect of lowering the costs the more monsters he produced at once, making it more than deserving of the name “Monster Mass Production.”

Instead of being instantly moved to the Jewel, the monsters created by this could then be stored inside Pandemonium using its “Storage” skill. Even though taking them out just once would make it impossible for them to be Stored again, until then, they could be kept inside semi-permanently.

Pandemonium was a gigantic fortress factory capable of producing as many monsters as resources allowed, then storing and unleashing them, making it more than worthy of being considered another apex among Embryos, a Superior Embryo.

Now, what if these three were to fight in a defensive battle?

Specifically, what if Franklin had attacked Gideon and the other two had protected it?

The expected result was obvious — Franklin would win a hundred times out of a hundred.

It wasn’t a matter of who was better than the other. It all boiled down to the difference in the vectors of their abilities.

As made obvious by its equipment enhancement ability, Figaro’s Superior Embryo was an “individual battle type,” focused on the power of one, and the same applied to Xunyu, as well.

Franklin, on the other hand, could summon countless monsters. He commanded armies that could overwhelm the earth, skies, and seas. In player terms, that made Franklin a “wide-scale suppression type.”

When that type was on the offensive side of a defensive battle, it was considered to have an absolute advantage. Those focused on individual power were staggeringly incompatible with those who had numbers on their side.

Sure, they would never actually be defeated. In fact, they could probably break through the overwhelming ranks and take down their leader. However, when defending an area, they would lack the numbers to keep the enemies at bay, and the place would be destroyed by those that leaked through.

Perhaps they could have been able to defeat the head of the enemy — Franklin, in this case — before his monsters reached the city. However, due to a trick by Franklin, it was evident that the

monsters would continue attacking even if he was defeated. The battles — or, rather, their aftermaths — here in the city made that all too obvious.

Due to that, Figaro and Xunyu would have been able to do little against him.

Even my individual battle type comrades would have a hard time in these situations.



Jeand Grasslands

“Hell yeah, baby. Man, it feels good to just... let it all out.” As Franklin expressed his pleasure, Pandemonium continued unleashing the numerous monsters. The way they swarmed out of the dragon’s mouth was highly reminiscent of a scene from an old anime.

Due to that, the sight might’ve been somewhat comical. But the fact that they were all heading to destroy Gideon, which was only a few kilometers ahead, made it no laughing matter.

“Get the Embryo!” shouted Sir Lindos. “Kill Franklin! We can still make it!”

A number of knights followed his order.

His decision was sound. Though they couldn’t stop the numerous monsters, they could prevent any harm to the city by defeating Franklin and making them all disappear. The knights would give their all to that possibility.

“Make it? Sorry, not happening,” said Franklin, making the knights halt. “With respect to the fact that you ruined two of my plans, let me reveal something to you, dear people of the kingdom.”

He was talking not only to the knights before him, but also to all the Masters trying to stop the tragedy.

“These monsters won’t stop if I die, and *I can’t make them stop even if I try.*”

His words confused just about everyone listening. It just didn’t sound like the words of the one who’d unleashed all these monsters unto Gideon.

“What are you saying?” asked Liliana. “These monsters are *your* doing, aren’t they?”

With that question, she was speaking for just about everyone on the scene.

Franklin simply widened his grin. “Yep. I made them all with my Pandemonium. However, they’re no longer mine.” He paused briefly. “I mean... *I let them go.*”

Once again, the ones listening had trouble processing what he was saying. And even after they were done, they still had trouble understanding.

“What... What are you saying?” asked Liliana, representing everyone yet again.

“Well, you know minion capacity, right?” said Franklin in response. “Giga Professor might be a Superior Job, but I still don’t have enough of it to take in *that many* monsters. And a party only has five slots, too.”

Tamed monsters worked using the minion capacity, which allowed the monsters to act as the owner’s own battle potential.

Though it could be increased by taking jobs from the tamer, knight, researcher, pimp or other groupings, the limits were still there. Using monsters too numerous or too strong for the capacity would either cause them to be unusable or greatly lower their power. Thus, Franklin had chosen to not be bound by it.

“If you want to make that many monsters fight to their full potential, letting them go is about the only option,” he explained.

Monsters that were let go were no longer being used by the ex-owner, so they also weren’t bound by the capacity. He’d completely discarded the restrictions.

“Oh, and don’t worry,” Franklin continued. “They’re properly programmed, so they won’t attack me. They’ve been set to ‘move forward until death’ and ‘kill everyone besides my clan members and my other monsters.’ That’s why I call them the ‘Suicide Series!’”

Though Franklin proudly puffed his chest, what he had done was nothing short of nauseating. He’d created an army of lives, set to move forward from birth to death while doing nothing but killing everything except a select few.

It was abhorrent enough even to those who saw *Infinite Dendrogram* as a game, and to those for whom it was another world, this deed was a work of pure madness.

“Why do you think I ran to the west?” he said. “If I’d used this in the north or the south, I could have damaged our dear Dryfe or Legendaria — the third party in this war. This is a deathly army made up of tens of thousands of monsters that are constantly on the move and can easily go through borders as long as they’re alive... And yeah, there’s Caldina in the east, but I don’t care. They’re our enemies too, after all.”

Not to mention that the likes of The Earth and the King of Termination will make short work of them when they get there, he was probably adding silently.

“Anyway, there’s nothing I can do about the monsters I let go, and they’ll keep going even if you somehow kill me. *Tu as compris?*” Franklin willfully used his real-life mother tongue to taunt his enemies.

Nemesis, Liliana, and the other Royal Guard knights were stunned

into silence. They had to defeat every single monster and then their source — Pandemonium and Franklin.

In the best case scenario, they would take care of Pandemonium before it could release the remaining 50,000 monsters. However, they simply didn't have the required battle potential to do it.

It would be difficult for Liliana, Sir Lindos, and the other knights to defeat Pandemonium by themselves. They would be able to do little to buy time against such an overwhelming number of monsters.

The barrier around the central arena had already been rendered useless, meaning that the Masters there could finally destroy it, and Cocytus's La Porte de l'Enfer had been canceled, as well. In a few minutes or so, the Masters from both places would come to their aid.

Before that, however, the Suicide Series would ravage the city of Gideon, and Pandemonium would release even more of the wretched creatures. Those "few minutes" were far too long.

Franklin spoke what everyone was thinking. "Heh heh heh, you won't make it—"

"I'll buy the time." A completely unexpected person spoke up, wiping the sneer from Franklin's face.

No one had thought he'd be in the spotlight again. After all — his battle was over. He'd been sleeping after having sacrificed his left arm and exerted every inch of his being to defeat his natural enemy.

And yet, he still stood up.

Ray Starling still had the power to stand.

His consciousness was in an uncertain state. The battle had completely drained him, and even the mind of the player controlling the avatar was in a sorry state. It was likely that he didn't even have a proper grasp of the situation.

And yet, he would still face the 5,000-strong monster army charging towards Gideon.

"Ray!"

"Ray?!"

Nemesis and Liliana's worried shouts weren't without reason. Ray still had a number of injury-based debuffs, couldn't move his left arm, and didn't even have half of his maximum HP.

And despite all this, he still stood up.

"Nemesis, Silver... let's go," he said as he called his trusty steed and extended his right arm towards his Embryo.

"...Certainly!" Nemesis said after a moment of hesitation. Then she took his hand and turned herself into the black greatsword.

"Ha ha... ha ha ha ha... Oh man, I think I'm gonna cry," laughed Franklin. "You're pretty maimed, my dude. It's pretty greedy of you to try and struggle in that state. Your battle is over, so why not just, you know, go to sleep?"

“It’s not over.”

“Hm...?”

“It’s not over yet,” Ray said firmly. “It’s too early to stop. I’ll keep going as long as I can stand and swing my blade.”

It was possible he was speaking those words only due to the uncertain state of his mind.

“As long as you... as long as I’m faced with tragedy.”

However, it might’ve been a glimpse into the very deepest reaches of his heart.

“...Oh, I see.” Franklin nodded, seemingly having realized something. “Though you’re both Maidens’ Masters, you’re completely unlike *him*. If anything, you’re just like the King of Tartarus.”

Ignoring Franklin’s words, Ray rode Silver towards the front of the 5,000 vile creatures.

“Hellish Miasma!” he shouted, causing his right arm to release the familiar triple debuff of poison gas.

Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness caused the monsters to slow down, but that was about it. The monsters unaffected by the gas either pushed the affected monsters to the side or simply trampled them, continuing their charge towards Gideon. However, a number of them recognized Ray as an enemy and moved to fight him.

There was no hint of cooperation between them. They randomly attacked Ray using their weapons, claws, fangs, organic projectiles, and offensive magic. Ray and Silver failed to evade them, causing him to end up on the ground.

It was uncertain whether it was because he was injured, because the enemies were many, or simply because Ray was a weakling whose level didn’t even break 50. Whatever the case, he was unable to move, and a number of monsters were approaching to finish him off.

Liliana, Sir Lindos, and the other knights tried to help him, but the other monsters were holding them back.

“Ray!” shouted Nemesis as several monstrous claws reached to take his life.

He didn’t have the time to heed her warning and get up.

And so, when Ray was on the verge of experiencing his second death in *Infinite Dendrogram*...

“GYAGHGHGHGHGHGHGHGHGH!”

...it was prevented by his *first death*.

The monsters that had been about to kill him were pulverized by bullet-like creatures — the very same ones that had once pulverized Ray himself. They came from the Embryo known as “Arc-en-Ciel,” and its Master was...

“AllOw Me to aSsisT.”

...the Superior Killer — a player killer shrouded in mystery... and

a black mist preventing people from telling their age or gender.

"TheY haVe tHe nUmBeRs," the figure said in an unnatural voice, most likely passed through a voice changer. "We shOulD coOperAte foR noW."

"Gh..."

It was the same Master that had killed Ray back in Noz Forest and later gone on to help him in his battle against Gardrandia.

Faced with this person, Ray said:

"Yeah. I'm counting on you... Marie."

He *called her by name*, as if it were no big deal.

"WhA?! EeeeEeeeEehHhhH?!" the Superior Killer cried.

"Eeeehhhhhh?!" Nemesis shrieked.

At that moment, a monster closed in from behind Marie. Ray quickly transformed Nemesis into the flag halberd and thrust her into it. Though Nemesis was still in a state of shock, Ray could still will her to change, and the monster was now thoroughly skewered.

"WhY?! HoW diD You KnoW?!" the Superior Killer cried.

"That's Marie?!" Nemesis yelled. "What is the meaning of this, Ray?!"

"I couldn't tell when we first met, but now, I can more or less make her out through the mist." After saying that, Ray heaved a sigh.

A monster saw that as an opening and tried attacking him, but Marie made short work of it using her spread-piercing bullets.

As she watched the monster disappear, Marie canceled the Voice Change skill and began speaking in her own voice. "Oh man, do I feel stupid for trying to hide it with Voice Change."

"Eh? Marie is actually the Superior Killer? You're not joking?" asked Nemesis, still flabbergasted.

"This is a bit of an emergency, so I would be thankful if you ignored that for now," said Marie.

"Sure," Ray replied as he launched a Vengeance on a monster that had previously attacked him. "But only if you duel me once we're done here."

He then brandished Nemesis in his only usable hand.

"Very well. I'll fight you with all I've got," said Marie as she brandished Arc-en-Ciel and the Palsy Stingblade before standing back-to-back with Ray.

And so, the two faced the monsters charging towards them.

The two had never before fought on the same side.

Marie had helped Ray once during his battle against Gardrandia and had killed him back during their fight in Noz Forest, but that was the full of extent of their common battle history. But despite that, they cooperated without any flaws to speak of and killed the encroaching monsters with great efficiency. That was possible because Marie had

observed Ray to try and find what she lacked, and because Ray had often thought about the actions taken by the one that'd killed him.

They moved as one, forming a wall that slightly slowed down the 5,000 monsters charging towards Gideon.

"HA!" Franklin shouted. "There's still just two of you, you know? Do you really think you're enough to hold against 5,000 monsters? Like hell!"

Franklin's words were nothing but the truth. Even if one was a newbie with a history of miraculous victories and the other was a player killer that had felled a Superior, two people simply weren't enough to stop the 5,000 monsters from the first wave, much less the 50,000 Franklin still had in store. Their defeat was all but inevitable.

"Then we will stop them with twenty."

Thus, they needed someone to link them to the possibility of victory.

The voice had come from behind the western gate, followed by countless attacks that left the monsters overwhelmed.

There were flames from an avian, offensive magic, a giant ball of steel, fire arrows, and the overpowering allure of Charm, among many other skills.

The 50 monsters standing at the forefront of the 5,000 were destroyed in but an instant.

"Ray! M— McBlackJack! I brought reinforcements!"

"Rook!" shouted Ray.

"...Is 'McBlackJack' supposed to be me?" asked Marie.

"He probably couldn't call you by name with all these people here," commented Nemesis.

At the western gate, there were twenty Masters, along with their summoned and tamed monsters. Standing at the front of the group were Rook, Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon, along with four other newbies that had gone different ways after the battle at the plaza and been able to survive long enough to make it here. The other twelve were the high-rank Masters that had been Frozen by La Porte de l'Enfer at the western gate.

Those Masters were very enthusiastic.

"Hell yeah! Let's go, boys!"

"We can't let the newbie kiddos get all the spotlight!"

"...I wonder if this will get on tomorrow's MMO Journal Planter."

"It's simple. We kill the Franklin!"

Evidently, their reasons for joining the battle were varied, but they were all Masters bearing the powers of high-rank jobs and Embryos.

Though they'd lost to Hugo due to compatibility issues, they were experienced players that had this duel city as their main haunt.

Naturally, the group was far stronger than Ray, and them joining the battle had a great effect upon it.

“No way,” Franklin muttered, more surprised than anyone else there.

After all, this turn of events was impossible. Franklin knew better than most that the Frozen debuff caused by Cocytus’s La Porte de l’Enfer wasn’t easy to undo. It nullified items that removed status effects and could last *at least* an hour, even if Hugo himself was killed.

The only way to get around these rules... was to have Hugo — the user of the skill — willingly undo its effects.

“You canceled it, Yu...”

It couldn’t be done by simply Charming him, either — he *had* to do it by himself. That could only mean that Hugo willingly betrayed Franklin and canceled the skill.

Oh wait, I was the one who betrayed her first, Franklin thought in self-derision.

“Well, whatever,” he said in a murderous tone. “There are still only twenty-two of you. If you think you can stop this surge of magic beasts, go ahead and try.”

This was followed by the Suicide Series roaring and baring their fangs.

They had already been set into the wild, so it wasn’t like they actually followed Franklin’s will. The core of their beings... every cell in their bodies... was screaming for them to attack the newly-appeared enemy creatures before them.

“We’ve gotta buy time!” one of the high-level Masters cried. “Don’t let a single one of these into the city until the guys from the arena get here!”

“Try to keep the newbies alive! They’ve worked too hard to get the death penalty here!”

“...Will we be famous if we pull through?”

“KILL THE FRANKLIN!”

The high-rank Masters charged towards the monsters, marking the start of a 22 vs 5,000 battle. In terms of scale, this was the largest battle that happened tonight so far.

However, it certainly wasn’t the largest that *would happen*.

Gideon’s central arena, the stage

No one saw the scene.

Most of the audience in the central arena were watching the broadcast, either with despair or slight hope.

Thus, no one saw a certain man approach the barrier sealing the stage. He was tall and wore the pelt of a black bear.

With casual steps, he closed in on the barrier.

There were some other Masters nearby. Upon realizing that there was no danger of monsters being released inside the city, they'd moved to try and free the two Superiors stuck inside the stage — Figaro and Xunyu. However, that barrier was even tougher than the one surrounding the arena as a whole, and when they'd realized they couldn't break it, they'd also started staring at the broadcast.

This man passed by them and stood right next to the barrier.

Suddenly, something attacked him.

It was a blue Slime — the remains of an Oxygen Slime that Franklin had released into this arena. Though most of them had been destroyed by the Masters here, one had been able to survive thanks to being hidden by some rubble.

Because it relied on things other than sight to perceive its surroundings, the Oxygen Slime was the only creature there that had noticed the man. And, since he'd happened to be right next to it, it had attacked him right after crawling out of the rubble.

The moment it came close to him, the man *reduced it to dust* with a casual backhand blow.

The hyper low temperature, ultra poisonous immortal Slime was *destroyed* by a mere fist.

“Eh?”

“Huh? Since when...?”

The sound of the battle — if you could call it that — caused by the Slime being pulverized made the Masters around the barrier notice the man. Right when they did, however, he swung his fist again and — just like the Slime — *destroyed* the barrier in one hit.

With it broken, the two Superiors inside were rendered free.

As the barrier's destruction made everyone in the arena panic in confusion, the man spoke to one of the Superiors: Over Gladiator, Figaro.

“I'm leaving this place to you. If the *thing below or the two in the audience* look like they're about to do something, you stop them, all right?”

After saying those words, the man made his way towards the exit.

“What will *you* do?” asked Figaro.

The man momentarily looked up at the broadcast and — with his back still turned — responded.

“I'll bind the possibility he seized.”



Chapter Three: And His Name is...

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In this game of his, Franklin had made a total of three grave mistakes.

Of course, those were just the mistakes from *my* perspective. A third party might see more or fewer than me.

These were the mistakes, one by one.

His first mistake was separating his plot to destroy Gideon and kidnap the princess into Plan A, B, etc. and going through them one after the other.

Considering the fact that he wanted to break the country's spirit by starting worse and worse plans the more the kingdom struggled, that might've been the right course of action, but in terms of the force he released, this design was highly ineffective. When unleashing your battle potential, you should always release everything all at once.

He should've released the monsters in the city and unleashed the 50,000 from Pandemonium right after using the barrier and starting the PK massacre. That way, the kingdom would have had next to no way of fighting back. The princess would have been kidnapped, and Gideon would have been severely damaged.

Since he'd chosen to do them all one by one, the plans had all been taken care of in that order, bringing us to our current situation.

What? “The result will be the same if his 50,000 monsters succeed,” you say? Well, true, the results would be the same *if* they succeeded. I’m fully aware of that.

His second mistake was mixing revenge against *him* into his plan.

You're wondering why that was a mistake? Surely you've noticed that adding the whole thing with the RSK into the plan extended the time until monster release, right? So that must be what I mean.

Ohh, no no, you've got it all wrong. The revenge itself wasn't a mistake.

The mistake was doing the revenge along with the plan, effectively *putting something on the line* into his battle.

You look like you don't understand.

Normally, that RSK thing would've beaten Ray. But by creating a condition where he would lose something if he lost, Franklin had made Ray significantly more powerful. And if that wasn't a mistake, I don't know what is.

In fact, even Ray's air bomb had only been possible to use because the city was thick with grudge that he could transform into MP.

If Franklin had aimed for Ray alone, he could've crushed him like a bug, don't you think? That was how the Superior Killer got him, after all. But Ray was really strong in cases like this, and that was why the RSK had lost.

It's not like we get many cases when people's lives are at stake on the other side, after all.

As for the third mistake... Ah, screw it.

Saying it is embarrassing.

Hey, even I can feel shame.

What? "A person who can feel shame would never walk around like that?" Oh, shut up. The reason why I have to walk around like that is because you messed with my character creation and...

Hm? "Just say the third mistake already?" All right, all right.

Franklin's third and greatest mistake was...



Jeand Grasslands

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, people had a tendency to use the terms "Demi-Dragon-tier" or "Pure-Dragon-tier" to denote a creature's fighting ability.

A Demi-Dragon-tier creature was equivalent to a party of six low-rank battle jobs or a single high-rank job, while a Pure-Dragon-tier creature was equivalent to a party of six high-rank jobs. That meant that a Pure-Dragon was about six times stronger than a Demi-Dragon.

One had to keep in mind that the power of the owner of a high-rank job greatly varied depending on how well-leveled their six low-rank jobs and two high-rank jobs were. Thanks to their Embryo bonuses and unique abilities, many high-rank Masters were able to defeat Pure-Dragons all by themselves. Still, it was a decent way to indicate a creature's strength.

Every single one of the 5,000 Suicide Series monsters released by Franklin were Demi-Dragon-tier, which made them equal to 5,000 high-rank jobs.

The ones fighting them were merely twenty-one Masters with low or high-rank jobs.

Even considering the sole Superior Job among them, their number was still only twenty-two.

By trying to add their Embryos into the equation, you could assume that they were all Pure-Dragon-tier, but even then, the difference in battle potential would be about 5,000 vs 132.

Naturally, those odds were ridiculous.

Despite that, however, even after three minutes had passed, not a

single Master had died.

“...Well, they’re sure holding out well,” Franklin muttered, clearly unamused. Even the one who’d unleashed the monsters hadn’t expected this.

This result was due to all the Embryos there.

The Masters alone numbered twenty-two, and even if Franklin disregarded the Embryos he’d known about, there were still twenty Embryos. Some greatly enhanced their allies, some created walls, while some were just really good at keeping armies at bay.

Embryos were extremely vibrant in terms of variation, and by using their powers wisely, they were able to hold their own against the 5,000-strong monster army.

Of course, Franklin’s monsters had great variety, as well. However, the Suicide Series had been programmed to do nothing but charge forward and kill until they themselves died. Though varied, they didn’t have the mental capacity to be able to cooperate and make the best of their variety.

Due to that, despite having an overwhelming numerical advantage, they didn’t seem to be able to break through the twenty-two Masters.

“...Well, then,” Franklin muttered.

In all honesty, having his monsters held back like this wasn’t a problem for him. Pandemonium was already releasing the next batch of monsters. According to his calculations, even if these Masters bought enough time for the Masters from the central arena to gather, the city would still end up severely damaged.

The twenty-two Masters holding back the monsters were already doing it with lots of desperation. Though none of them had died yet, they had only taken care of a small percentage of the 5,000 monsters. And the Masters had used up lots of their MP and SP, making it more than obvious that they would soon be rendered unable to struggle and get overwhelmed.

Then there was the fact that Franklin had ten times that number of monsters, not to mention that he was protected by the likes of DGP and KOS, both monsters matching Superior Jobs in power.

Franklin recalled that the Masters in the central arena amounted to around 1,000, which was a number that he could certainly handle.

When it came to battle ability, Franklin was among the weakest Superiors. In a fair, 1v1 battle, he could even be defeated by a low-rank job.

However, he excelled at strategy.

After the war with the kingdom half a year ago by *Infinite Dendrogram*’s time standards, he’d spent enough time and resources to gather enough monsters to handle 1,000 Masters with little trouble.

“...Well well, then,” Franklin murmured.

The only real problem left was those two Superiors: Over Gladiator, Figaro and Master Jiangshi, Xunyu. By intervening in their Clash and sealing them using the barrier’s stopping function, Franklin had most likely made enemies out of them. If they intervened, Franklin would almost certainly be given the death penalty.

Figaro was exclusively a solo player, so there was a chance he wouldn’t get involved. Xunyu, on the other hand, could very possibly use her ultimate skill to claw his heart out at any given moment.

However, Franklin didn’t care about that.

Even if he were to die, the 10,000-strong monsters released so far would still attack Gideon, not to mention the fact that he had another ace up his sleeve.

While Franklin was the diamond, King of Orchestras was the club, and Hugo was the heart, the spade was a certain something placed underneath the arena that was patiently waiting to be activated.

That was exactly what would happen if Franklin were to get the death penalty. It was part of Plan D — the final plan he’d hinted at when talking to Elizabeth.

Still, Franklin assumed that it would all end before he would have to go through with it. Franklin’s monsters would soon overwhelm Gideon and completely ravage it. This group of people was nothing but a speed bump against his army.

If Gideon fell while being actively protected by Masters, the kingdom would finally break, and his goal would be achieved.

“...Well well well well, then,” Franklin murmured.

Franklin was going to win regardless of whether he chose to do anything more or not.

“All right, they piss me off. Let’s kill them.”

And that was exactly why he made his move.

Franklin looked at DGP, the dinosaur that was scattering the Royal Guard around Pandemonium. He’d used a Legendary UBM’s special reward in its creation. That gave it enough power to match such UBMs, and due to that, it was his strongest monster currently on the scene, not counting the spade.

When Ray had charged towards the Suicide Series, Franklin had assumed that it wouldn’t need to be used. But now, he ordered it to massacre all the Masters that’d gathered.

“DGP, be a darling and trample those eyesores.”

“VRGHAAAAAHHHH!” It released an earth-shaking roar as it charged with ground-shattering power in its steps. It was heading straight towards the front lines of the battle between the 5,000 monsters and twenty-two Masters, and it got there in only a few moments.

First, the twenty-two Masters became twenty.

DGP, clad in a red aura, went straight for the two high-rank jobs right at the front, quickly crushing and turning them into dust. In addition, an Embryo that took damage in their stead reached its limit and shattered.

Then the twenty became nineteen.

The red aura canceled a spell from a high-rank magic job.

DGP responded by swinging its tail and splitting the person in half, instantly making them vanish.

Then the nineteen became sixteen.

Three Masters simultaneously attacked it using their ultimate skills, but before they could have an effect, DGP chomped them all with a speed so great it left afterimages.

In but a moment, the twenty-two that had held against 5,000 had become sixteen because of a single creature.

“Tch!” Marie — the only Superior Job on the scene — clicked her tongue as she shot piercing bullets into DGP’s head.

Upon entering the red aura, the bullets lost their power and speed before being deflected by the monster’s shell.

“This is the defensive *and* offensive ‘Dragon King Aura!’” she realized. “This one must’ve been made using material from a Dragon King!”

Marie was completely right.

“Dragon Kings” were a type of UBM. They were basically Pure-Dragons with great enough power to be titled kings of their sub-species. Their Dragon King Aura could weaken all attacks coming their way, and since they were unique for every generation, all of them were recognized as UBMs.

Franklin had defeated a number of Dragon Kings, and DGP had been made using the special reward from one called “Fangdragon King, Drag-Phalanx.” Due to that, its power easily surpassed that of Pure-Dragons. It could easily have fought on par with the UBM used as its base, and it even had the Dragon King Aura symbolic of their kind.

“VGHAAAAHHHHH!”

“Khh...!” Marie cried.

When in top shape, Superior Jobs such as Marie had only about a 50% chance of winning against Legendaries. However, using her ultimate skill against Veldorbell had rendered her incapable of using bursting and homing bullets, lowering her chances even further.

I could try to send “Ulbetia the Piercing Murder” at a vital spot where the aura is thin, but even then, it’s questionable if that would be enough, she thought.

Even though doing that would cost her the Green Piercing and

Silver Flash bullets, Marie believed that it wouldn't do the job on this creature.

Entities above Pure-Dragon-tier had great HP, and it was rare for them to die due to just a single ultimate skill from a Superior Job. Combined with the fact that DGP had powers matching that of the Fangdragon King that had been used in its creation, it was highly unlikely that Arc-en-Ciel would be enough to defeat it.

But then again, they were in no position to battle it for long. The more DGP ravaged the front lines and the longer Marie stalled, the more monsters would enter the city.

Marie readied herself and loaded Arc-en-Ciel with a special bullet meant for ultimate skills.

“Phantasmal Raing—”

Before she could go through with it, the DGP made its move.

Just like before, it moved at a speed great enough to leave afterimages and charged towards a Master a short distance away — in this case, Ray.

“Ray!” both Marie and Rook shouted as DGP quickly closed in on him.

In a sense, this turn of events was only obvious. Franklin wanted to crush Ray more than anyone else on the scene, so there was nothing surprising about DGP following its owner's will.

“Wait— kh!” Marie tried to go after it, but she was then surrounded by a number of AGI-focused Suicide Series.

“Mh...”

Ray silently watched as DGP stormed towards him, and it was hard to tell whether it was because his mind was still hazy or because he knew exactly what he had to do.

He sighed.

“Ray...?” Nemesis spoke as he brandished her.

Ray was already aware that he had no means of escape. He wasn't riding Silver, and even if he was, he still wouldn't have the speed to avoid the upcoming attack.

Thus, he knew that he was about to experience his second death in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

However, he intended to do something before leaving the scene. Specifically, he wanted to *land a counterattack at the same moment he was damaged*.

Even if the attack instantly killed him, he thought he could hit it with a single Vengeance before dying, which could maybe help turn the situation around.

As such thoughts went through his mind, Nemesis read them and prepared for what was to come.

“Very well,” she said.

She would do all in her power to activate the skill at the right moment.

As the two readied themselves, DGP arrived at just a few meters away from him. It opened its maw, determined to erase the enemy of its creator.

“Bring it!” Ray shouted.

Everyone was watching that moment.

Marie watched it.

Rook watched it.

Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon watched it.

The ten surviving Masters watched it.

Liliana watched it.

Sir Lindos watched it.

The Royal Guard watched it.

The people of Gideon watched it.

The people of the capital watched it.

Figaro and Xunyu, now free from the barrier, watched it.

Franklin watched it.

Ray faced the deathly jaws opening before him, fully prepared to do what he needed to do before he died.

Nemesis, too, faced the enemy, ready to fulfill her Master’s wish, even if it would cost him his life.

Everyone watched it... and yet *no one saw it*.

No one saw the moment that man appeared before Ray.

“Save your desperate counters for a cooler scene, goofus!” the man called.

“Eh?” Ray muttered a voice of confusion, and he certainly wasn’t alone in that regard.

As if some frames were skipped, the man appeared as though he had always been there.

He was clad in furs, which definitely made him look odd. The upper part of his head was covered by the pelt of a bear, which extended to his back and flowed like a cape. He was tall, and though he had no upper clothing, his exposed muscles looked much like pure steel. Black pants reminiscent of a hakama covered his legs, and their texture seemed to be the same as that of the fur on his head.

For reasons unknown, his right leg was raised towards the sky.

From the fact that he had no trouble keeping the pose up, it was safe to assume that he’d had his share of physical training.

“Bro, this is the kind of stuff you pull when you know you’ll survive *and* kill the enemy,” he said with his leg still raised to the sky. “Doing this only to damage them and die regardless of whether you succeed is just... beary lacking. All right, all right, I’ll drop the puns for now.”

The man's appearance and words were strange enough, but there was something even more weird about the sight.

The dinosaur was gone.

DGP, the monster that had been about to consume Ray, had completely disappeared the moment the man in the furs had shown up.

"...Nooo wayyy," muttered Marie.

She, along with a few other Masters, had noticed what was happening here. They were all looking towards the sky — towards DGP, hurtling off *several hundred meters in the air*. Those with good eyesight could see that its head was completely shattered and that it was slowly turning into particles of light.

From the dinosaur's sorry state and the man's right leg — still raised in a kicking position — the onlookers assumed two things.

The man had just kicked a monster weighing at least ten tons up into the sky, and he had *destroyed* the beast in just a single kick, ignoring the Dragon King Aura and its immense HP.

"Hmm, that lizard had some decent weight," the man said.

"...Ah."

Upon seeing the manner in which the man lowered his leg and looking at the lower, unhidden part of his face, Ray realized that it was someone he knew very well.

"Well, you went and overdid it, as usual, but you're still alive, so it's all good." Upon saying that, the man gently patted Ray on the head. "Kept you waiting, huh?"

"...So you came," Ray said.

"Hey, I told you I would, didn't I?" After taking his hand away, the man in the furs reached into the bag at his side, his inventory, and took something out. It was a ring called "Voice Amplification Ring" — a name that said it all. "Uhh... Test, test. You hearing this, Franklin?"

"...Uh, Yeah, I am..." Franklin said.

"All right, that's good. I'll just make a little proclamation, then."

"...A proclamation?"

"You made a really big mistake in this game of yours," said the pelt-clad man before pausing for a second. "*You messed with my little brother.*"

Though only a few could understand what he was talking about, everyone on the scene and even those just watching the broadcast could feel the intensity of the fighting spirit in those words.

"So yeah... Franklin. Here's how it's gonna go," the man said. "I — The King of Destruction — am gonna *obliterate* every single one of your precious monsters."

Shu Starling made his will known.

Thus began the night's final battle.

The wielder of the imperium's most numerous force — Mr. Franklin.

The wielder of the kingdom's most powerful force — Shu Starling.

Quantity vs quality.

Giga Professor vs. King of Destruction.

Superior vs. Superior.

In a great act of irony, that evening's main event had been replaced by something fundamentally identical.

The Clash of the Superiors.

Chapter Four: King of Destruction, Shu Starling

???

Shu Starling, the King of Destruction, was one of the kingdom's four Superiors, and he'd reigned at the top of the country's kill rankings for over two years of *Infinite Dendrogram* time.

His name was known to few, but his many deeds were spoken of far and wide.

These were such things as the defeat of the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria; the Corpse Stronghold incident in the Southern Sea; the Kim-un-kamuy incident in Tenchi; the disappearance of an entire mountain range in Caldina, attributed to his battle against The Earth; and the crashing of the Unidentified Flying Stronghold, Laputa, which was one of Huang He's Superior Embryos.

Though he'd gained a reputation as the central figure in those and countless other such events, there was next to no information about him.

His appearance was as much of a mystery as his name, and many argued that his avatar wasn't actually human. Witnesses described him as "white," "black," "always looking different," or "soft and fluffy," and though it turned out those rumors weren't wrong, there was no denying the vagueness of them.

However, there were two specific pieces of info most thought to be highly accurate.

One was the idea that he held a Superior Job from the crasher grouping. Its stat growth focused entirely on STR, and its specialty was the breaking of material defenses in events such as castle sieges. Alas, that job grouping's AGI and END was very low, making it unsuitable for vanguard roles.

But the King of Destruction, Shu Starling, was...



Jeand Grasslands

The sight was much like a scene from a decade-old action manga.

The man kicked a monster. The sad creature was pulverized and sent flying towards other monsters, all of which shattered upon impact.

Another monster came from behind the man.

Before the monster realized it, the man had placed his fist right below its neck and thrown it upwards for an uppercut, launching the unfortunate creature to the stars.

In less than a minute, more than 300 monsters had been completely shattered — no, *destroyed*.

And it was all done by one man: the King of Destruction.

“You’ve gotta be shittin’ me...” Franklin muttered in disbelief, and he was fully justified in doing so.

After all, the hundreds of monsters the man was sweeping up definitely weren’t just cannon fodder. They were all Demi-Dragon-tier, and therefore monsters strong enough to match battle-focused high-rank jobs. In fact, their relentless nature and lack of concern for their own lives made them even stronger than a usual Demi-Dragon.

And yet, they could do nothing to stop this man.

The man began to run, pulverizing a monster.

He casually swung an arm, making another monster explode.

Another monster dropped dead by simply grazing one of his fingers.

Countless monsters were *destroyed* as though they were more frail than papier-mâché.

Now, Franklin would have been fully willing to accept and understand the scene if the man had been using a skill that did something along the lines of “Destroys what you touch.”

But there was simply no such thing.

The man wasn’t using a single skill.

The King of Destruction was able to create the scene simply because *he was strong*.

“Hhhhh...” Franklin sighed, impressed to the point of speechless shock. After all, he was the one who knew the reasons behind the ridiculous feats better than anyone else on the scene. Franklin’s right eye was shining blue, emitting an aura of knowledge and understanding.

All high-rank and Superior Jobs had ultimate and unique skills, and Franklin’s Giga Professor was no exception. One such skill was “The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom.”

It allowed him to find out the target’s stats, skills, growth, status effects, and materials dropped by simply looking at them long enough. Even skills such as Conceal or Disguise meant little against that skill.

Skill explanations would be shrouded in a mist that slowly faded, while stat points would start at 0 and gradually rise at a pace of about 2,000 per second until they arrived at the correct number.

For example, he had seen all the stats of Marie — the stealth-focused Death Shadow — in only about 10 seconds of looking.

Franklin was now using it on that man, and he just didn't know what to make of what he saw.

The King of Destruction *job level* was 1,080, while his STR had already exceeded 100,000 and still continued to rise.

"Man, what the actual fuck?" he burst out.

The stats seen by The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom stopped rising upon reaching the right number, meaning that the man's STR easily surpassed 100,000. Considering that some stat-focused Superior Jobs had a hard time breaking 10,000, that number was nothing if not ludicrous. Sure, the number included Embryo and equipment bonuses, but that did little to soften his astonishment.

The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom also displayed any skills the target used.

They appeared as momentary, flashing pop-ups, and Franklin *had yet to see any of them* since the King of Destruction had entered the scene, effectively proving that the man was merely destroying the monsters with nothing but pure power.

All the destruction here was caused by simple *standard attacks*.

"When it comes to STR alone, he might be a match for the King of Beasts," Franklin muttered, comparing the man to the strongest Master he knew.

The King of Destruction might actually be the Master with the greatest STR.

But that was with STR alone. The rest of the stats weren't high. And it wasn't like they merely seemed low because of the towering, six-digit STR. All of the other stats besides it and the five-digit HP were in the four-digit range.

In fact, his AGI was just barely over 1,000. There was simply no balance in these stats.

The go-to path for vanguard roles was to focus on either AGI, so that they could move at supersonic speeds, or END, in order to bear many attacks. A standard Superior Job like that would have at least 5,000 of one or the other, but the King of Destruction was different.

He had a pure STR build, focusing entirely on STR while discarding all the other stats.

Sure, that gave him a lot of attack power. With all the Embryo and equipment bonuses, he was now doing damage that made him seem more monstrous than the actual monsters.

However, he shouldn't have been able to survive this fight.

Though the monsters were merely Demi-Dragon-tier, the ones focused on speed had five times more AGI than the King of Destruction did. A STR build like him should've been showered by attacks from the AGI monsters, and he should've lost his HP until it was all gone.

One such monster attempted to bite into the man's neck from one of his blind spots, only to be shattered by a fist that was *placed* right before its eyes.

"This makes no sense," muttered Franklin. The scene seemed to both match the stats and completely betray them.

Most of the onlookers likely thought that the King of Destruction was *just strong*. Franklin, however, could see the stats, notice the inconsistency, and realize that it wasn't caused by some skill.

Thus, he came across the answer... but he couldn't comprehend it at all.

There was no other possible explanation for the scene, but it seemed like a part of some joke.

After all...

"Am I seriously supposed to believe *he's using fighting skills he brought from reality?*"



Central arena, the stage

"If the enemy is ten times faster, you just read ten moves ahead," Figaro quoted.

"What thE hell?"

"Apparently, he reads their movements and places his attacks at points where they can't change their trajectory."

"Huhhh...? What tHe hELL?"

It was the central arena, the location of what was supposed to have been the night's main event, the Clash of the Superiors. Two Masters were standing on its stage and watching the broadcast above.

One was the Over Gladiator, Figaro, while the other was the Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.

They were the stars of the Clash of the Superiors and the ones who Franklin had locked up in the time-stopping barrier. Now, after being released, the two were just standing and watching the second Clash.

Of course, the other Masters in the arena — especially those who'd tried to save them — wanted the two to join the battle outside. However, Figaro showed no interest in participating in an ongoing battle, while Xunyu seemed to have entered spectator mode. Getting them to fight was hopeless at this point.

Being the greatest players of all, Superiors were often the most troublesome and stubborn of eccentrics. Upon realizing that, the rest of the Masters reluctantly gave up on getting their help and headed out to battle themselves.

They assumed the Superiors would move the moment the arena or the tians inside it were endangered, and they weren't wrong on that

front. Still, there was no denying that the two Superiors' casual chat didn't seem to fit the situation.

"How did yoU even get to knOW that?" asked Xunyu.

"We had a fight after he became King of Destruction," said Figaro. "That was when I asked him how he could guard against my attacks when I have so much more AGI than him, and that was his answer."

"Oh yeah, thE bear deflected my attAckS, too..." Xunyu remembered. "But is it even pOssible to read ten movES ahead?"

"It's possible for him, it seems. He said he's 'dabbled' in martial arts in the past."

"Whoa, that's prEtTy cool. Maybe I should pick martiAL arts when I'm in juniOR high... Though, wAit, I think thAt was an oPTion for bOYs only."

"Even if you can't take classes, you can find gyms or dojos in most sufficiently civilized towns," Figaro said.

"Or maybe I cAN find some crazy mArTial arts in some seclUded place or soMEthing. That's hOW it goes here, anYway."

"Oh, you mean that one Superior Job discovered in Huang He? 'The Arts,' was it? I always thought that the 'The One' series of jobs was limited to weapon types and magic elements, so I was pretty surprised to find out that there was one for bare fists."

"Man, how did thAT guy even clear those cONditions?!" Xunyu added. "He's not okAy in the head! The bEar gives him a run fOR his money, thOUGH! They're both MAdmen!"

"Shu's a friend of mine, but I can't deny that."

Despite fighting each other in an intense, deadly battle just a mere hour ago, Figaro and Xunyu were now watching the show at Jeand Grasslands and talking like good friends.

Many delinquents of the past had believed that anyone who went all out against each other would become pals, and though that wasn't quite true, duel rankers seemed to have something similar. After all, their current interaction made them look like the best of buddies.

"Anyway, wasn't he in a beAR costume?" asked Xunyu. "What's with that appEarance? He's still a bear, bUT still."

"It's a convertible piece of equipment," answered Figaro. "It's presented as an Ancient Legendary 'Suit,' but it's actually a Mythical 'Godcloth.' You know how there are bosses that basically go, 'This isn't even my final form' and transform? They drop these convertibles every now and then."

"...I've nevEr met any of these retrO RPG demon loRds."

"Really? You have about a 1% chance to meet them at the boss rush in the later stages of the Tomb Labyrinth."

"...Eh? You've beEN there more than 100 tiMEs?" Xunyu asked.

"Isn't that normal? And it's 214 times. It hasn't been long since I

started reaching that point.”

“That’s a lot, mAn. But now it makEs sense why you hAve all those items.”

“All that stuff can be troublesome, though,” Figaro said. “Even when it comes to inventories, I have so much that I don’t know what to do with it all. Anyway, convertible equipment is interesting, but their abilities can be really weird. Shu’s is a UBM special reward, so it seems to be adjusted for him.”

“Oh?”

“As a Suit, it was focused on stealth, so I think that applies to the true form, too,” Figaro said. “From the way he entered the battle, I assume it has some skill that ‘Hides your appearance and presence until you enter the battle.’ It might have some other conditions, though.”

“...He cAN pull off a surprise attAck with *that* kind of damage? That’s just unfAir.”

“Your ultimate skill isn’t too different, though.”

“GheaHahAhahaH! You gOt me therE!” Xunyu guffawed.

Their exchange was friendly, and they talked like true gamers. However, to the audience in the arena, it looked like the two Superiors were consulting about how to handle the chaos threatening Gideon. Due to this, the overall sentiment in the audience was tenseness and excitement at what was happening on the broadcast mixed with hope for the two champions on the stage.

But alas, the two they so believed in were just having a simple chat.

“By the wAY,” Xunyu said.

“What?”

...Or so it seemed.

“When will thAt shitty labcOat dude use the thing undeR us?”

“It’s probably a tactical self-destruction monster, so he’ll probably do it after his Plan C falls apart,” Figaro said. “It shouldn’t be long now.”

Not all of it was just idle chatter after all.

“Then I’ll get riD of the thing wiTH my ultimate sKill. You shoUld —”

“I’ll stop the two ‘strongests’ if they go on the offensive. I’m interested in the thing below, but sadly, I’m a pure solo player.”

“GhehAh! But those two arE way more tROoublesome!” cried Xunyu.

“Dealing with them sounds like fun, though, doesn’t it?”

“AgreEd.”

Watching the fight of their fellow Superior, the two readied their fangs.



Central arena, audience seats

At the eastern side of the arena, there was a woman with a porcupine on her knees. Just like everyone else, she was watching the broadcast.

While doing so, she noticed something. Not about the scene displayed, but about Behemot — her porcupine partner.

She could easily tell that the sight of the King of Destruction filled the creature with much excitement and joy.

They'd been in *Infinite Dendrogram* for over four years now, so it was easy for her to notice such changes in the porcupine's mood.

"That's clearly the same bear that you were so fond of," she said. Upon remembering how Behemot had climbed on the bear suit's head, she formed a faint smile.

At the same time, a thought came to her mind. It was a sentiment shared by many of the audience members watching the broadcast.

He's strong.

Just like most, she saw Shu Starling as powerful. However, what that strength made her feel was quite unlike what the rest of the audience felt.

To most, his struggle was their last hope, while what she felt was very different.

He's using tricks, too, but most of it is just pure power, the woman thought. I like that. It makes my heart flutter. I want him to hit me, and I would love to crush him, too. He'd be a much better opponent than the two on the stage.

She was the only one watching him who wanted to face him as an enemy.

Her gaze was that of a bloodthirsty beast, and the meager amount of bloodlust she exuded was enough to make the surrounding tians shake in fear, unaware as to why. But she was quick to hide that lust for battle, for Behemot sent her a certain thought.

"He's like a hero."

In the broadcast, Shu scattered a number of monsters with but a single kick. Despite facing countless of the disgusting creatures, he stood strong and continued felling them, hit by hit.

The sight made her nod. "Yes, he truly is a hero. Especially when you consider he's fighting the Giga Professor, who's quite the villain."

Shu was a true hero facing a horde of disgusting monsters all by himself, while Franklin, the leader of the horde, looked like nothing but a vile madman.

"Well, I certainly won't call it pathetic," she added, giving her opinions on the situation while telepathically talking to Behemot.

“Hey,” said the porcupine.

“Yes, what is it?” asked the woman.

“Which is stronger — *the queen of beasts or the hero?*”

“Well...”

She knew the hidden meaning behind the question and put her response into spoken word.

“We should see for ourselves.”

It was a promise for a not-so-distant future.

“Anyway, it’s good that we came here,” she added telepathically.

“I’m happy we found someone who meets our desires.”

With that, she focused entirely on the broadcast.

Thus, she and Behemot — the two representing the joker card that wouldn’t help Franklin in his game — decided to just silently watch the battle.



Jeand Grasslands

The King of Destruction’s bare fists had already destroyed more than 1,000 monsters. Not only that, but his feats allowed the ten-odd Masters nearby to regroup and take on any monsters that slipped through the Superior’s devastation.

The Masters that had been closed in the central arena were now pouring through the western gate and aiding the war effort, too.

The Masters outside had been able to buy enough time, and the situation was shifting in favor of the Masters guarding the city of Gideon.

Despite all that, Franklin still had a wide grin on his face.

“Well, I have his skills and stats now, and it sure is something...” he murmured.

The King of Destruction’s stats and battle prowess were astonishing, indeed. Each of his punches was on par with a high-rank Embryo ultimate skill, and the fact that they were paired with excellent combat ability made them nothing short of frightening.

It didn’t end there. The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom allowed Franklin to see the King of Destruction’s unique skill, and it was definitely something to be feared.

Its name was “Right of Destruction,” and its description was, “Allows you to destroy indestructible targets with endurance lower than your attack power.”

Franklin believed the skill let the King of Destruction destroy creatures that nullified physical attacks, such as Slimes and Spirits. After all, the skill had flashed up on his Eye of Wisdom when the King of Destruction had destroyed a King-Size Oxygen Slime in just one hit.

Considering the attack power his ridiculous STR gave him, Right

of Destruction likely allowed him to negate any and all Destruction Negation skills.

“Well, he sure surprised me,” said Franklin. “But he won’t be a problem.”

No matter how strong and combat proficient, the King of Destruction’s strength was still merely the strength of one. He was the same as the other two Superiors Franklin had deemed to be of little concern; he wasn’t anything Franklin couldn’t deal with.

The many other masters gathered here weren’t a big problem, either. Pandemonium would soon finish unleashing the remaining monsters.

Though they were also part of the Suicide Series, they were of a different version than the 5,000 that had been released first.

About a third of them were on par with Pure-Dragons, but that certainly wasn’t all. When Pandemonium released Franklin’s monsters into the wild, he could make slight modifications to them, which included the addition of simple orders.

The reason he’d released the 5,000 first was to make the kingdom believe that all Suicide Series monsters only charged forward. The new order he added to the 50,000 monsters was simple: “After all the Suicide Series monsters are released, surround Gideon and invade it.”

That meant the city was about to be attacked by 50,000 monsters coming from every direction.

The kingdom’s Masters would be able to handle it if Franklin released them gradually. If they banded together and focused all their powers into sweeping up the monsters, they could likely protect the city with little trouble.

However, if the 50,000 monsters all split up and attacked simultaneously from every direction, the side with the smaller numbers wasn’t going to stand a chance.

Even if they had the King of Destruction and his exceptional STR, and even with the 1,000 Masters from the arena, a significant portion of the monsters would surely break into the city. And with that, Franklin would be victorious.

As Pandemonium released the last of the monsters, Franklin spoke up.

“All right, now they’ll advance to the city and—”

But before he could finish his sentence, the world before his eyes underwent a drastic change.

Parts of the ground were ejected upwards, and its pieces and dust began covering the sky.

Violent ear and flesh-rending explosive sounds overwhelmed his surroundings.

The stench of gunpowder and blood assaulted his nose.

And between the explosions, he could hear the dying wails of countless monsters.

He realized that the monsters he was releasing were quickly being exterminated by countless cannon shots from places unknown.

“Artillery?! What the...?!”

At that moment, he remembered the two most reliable rumors concerning King of Destruction, the mysterious Superior.

One was the idea that he was a Superior Job from the crasher grouping. The other was...

“A battleship!” Franklin shouted.

The surrounding explosions abated, and the battlefield was caressed by a speedy gale. It blew away the cloud of dirt shrouding the ground beneath, revealing that not a single one of the Suicide Series had survived the onslaught unscathed. And beyond the wretched creatures, there was something that hadn’t been there before.

Just like Franklin’s Pandemonium, it had once been hidden by Optic Camouflage, but now it was concealed no longer.

It was larger than Gideon’s walls.

It was a weapon.

It was a vehicle.

It was a *Superior Embryo*.

It was a land battleship, crushing the ground beneath with its gigantic caterpillar tracks.

It very much confirmed the second most reliable piece of information about the King of Destruction: “His Embryo is a battleship.”

This was the War God Ship, Baldr.

“Twin Quintuple Cannons, firebombs loaded... Barrage.” The Superior Embryo spoke in a robotic voice as it fired the quintuple cannons on both its sides towards the surviving monsters.

The incendiary shots leaked fuel as they rent the air and slammed into the monsters, either turning them into burning effigies or simply reducing them to ash.

“Stardust Genocider,” the Embryo said.

It wasn’t just artillery that it had. The extremely masculine, tank-like, ship-like Embryo suddenly exposed countless aircraft catapults on one of part of its deck.

They all momentarily lit up and released strange projectiles that left trails of smoke behind them.

Like ravenous hawks, the flying objects relentlessly went after the monsters, exploding upon impact and reducing them to dust.

“Bloody Laser Storm.”

Certain parts of the ship’s hull slid open, revealing a number of

sentry guns. They all started autonomously releasing crimson lasers towards the monsters within range, neatly slicing them up.

If this wasn't an overwhelming annihilation, nothing was. Each and every piece of Baldr's weaponry was focused on wide-area extermination.

In a short while, it had already taken care of more than 10,000 of Franklin's monsters. The menacing creatures he'd wanted to use to make the kingdom succumb were nothing but lowly insects before the battleship.

"He... What... He kills stuff in a large radius, too?!" For the first time that day, Franklin raised his voice in anger.

He had every reason to do so.

After all, he was looking at his natural enemy.

Franklin's Pandemonium was a wide-scale suppression type — one that felled a target location through sheer numbers.

The King of Destruction's Baldr was a wide-scale extermination type — one that killed great numbers through sheer force.

Like skills, items, and jobs, Embryos also had compatibility.

Just like Franklin was certain he could win against Figaro and Xunyu, who both focused on individual power, he was now certain that he couldn't win against the King of Destruction.

The barrage of attacks had already felled 10,000, and it wouldn't be too long until there was nothing left. The surviving monsters followed their imprinting and tried to split up, but it was obvious they wouldn't last against *that* firepower.

The King of Destruction, true to his name, would destroy them all.

He was the kingdom's most powerful. He was the country's strongest Master, bearing the Embryo with the greatest firepower. He could never be stopped by mere numbers with half-baked abilities.

"...I guess this is it," Franklin muttered as he realized that his Plan C had failed completely.

It would take some time for the Suicide Series to be completely exterminated, but they could never harm Gideon now.

Even if, by some freak miracle, some monsters survived the onslaught, the other Masters on the scene would have no trouble mopping them up.

"I lost Plan A to Ray Starling, Plan B to the Superior Killer, and Plan C — the one that took the longest to prepare — to the King of Destruction..." The fact that he was being cornered made Franklin laugh in self-derision. "Ha ha ha ha... Funny how they just keep getting stronger every time I use a nastier plan..."

At this point, there was simply no way for Franklin to win. The King of Orchestras, Veldorbelt was down, Hugo Lesseps had abandoned him, and the traitorous Masters on his side were

thoroughly unreliable.

We'd probably be able to turn it all around if those two decide to participate, Franklin thought. But he knew that it wouldn't happen. The two girls he'd counted as his joker had dropped out of the scene the moment they'd found out that the first princess hadn't come to Gideon.

Hell, if she were here, we could... No, that's stupid. What am I even thinking? Franklin even went as far as to remember a certain person who was no longer at his side, and ridiculed himself for it.

“...Enough.”

He looked down at Pandemonium, the battlefield, and Gideon with the coldest of looks on his face.

“All right, I get it. I can't win this, no matter what.” As though convincing himself, he spoke those words and reached into his lab coat's pocket. “So I'll just delete both your victory and my defeat.”

He pressed the button to activate his final pawn.





Central arena, underground

As the many people in the arena's audience watched the broadcast with either joy or worry, a certain something 4,000 meters underground was digging through the bedrock and making its way towards the surface.

It was a monster highly reminiscent of a centipede.

Using the spinning, drill-like appendage on its head, it broke through the tough bedrock and charged towards its destination.

The monster's name was the NDW, short for the Nuclear Dragon Worm, and it was the final piece that Franklin had prepared for his plan.

The NDW was a creature that had been developed using a Demi-Dragon Worm as its base, and that gave it a great tunneling ability. However, that certainly wasn't its main feature.

The NDW was equipped with a single, extremely powerful weapon.

Since it was underground, no one could see the creature, but if they did, they'd notice that its chest was shining red.

It was basically a nuclear bomb.

Franklin had defeated an Ancient Legendary UBM called "Nuke Dragon, Untergang" and used its special reward to create the NDW.

Once activated, it would burn everything in a two kilometer radius in a storm of fire and radiation. Naturally, the NDW would die as well, but it wouldn't mind that. Right from the start, the monster had been designed to be a self-destruction superweapon.

The NDW was the main component of Plan D for "destroy," the plan that Franklin had decided to start if the many Suicide Series monsters from Plan C somehow failed.

It was his spade — the final ace up his sleeve — and using it would be the equivalent of flipping the entire game board upside down.

If the NDW reached the surface and blew up, everyone in the arena would die. That would include the tian spectators, Count Gideon himself, and the Masters still there.

Of course, the arena — the symbol of the city — would blow up, as well.

The severe losses would bring great chaos and despair upon the kingdom, and the country would be unable to claim they'd been victorious against Franklin.

He'd prepared the NDW to prevent the kingdom and its people from rebuilding, on the off chance that they might attain victory

against him.

Franklin would've liked to have kept the central arena and its precious functions for when the imperium gained control over the kingdom, but even that was nothing compared to the possibility of losing.

“DRRRRRRR...”

The NDW drilled through the hard bedrock, making short work of it. At the rate it was going, it would reach the surface within the next few minutes or so. It would fulfill Franklin's desire and burn his defeat along with Gideon.

When it came close to the surface, its high-quality biological audio sensors began picking up the voices of the people above.

“Go, KoD!”

“Masters! Please do your best!”

“Please help us...”

Most of the voices were supporting the King of Destruction and the other Masters fighting the monsters, while the rest were worried about whether they would see tomorrow. But none of them were overcome by despair.

Clearly, none of them had any idea that they would be wiped from this world the moment the NDW reached the surface in just a few minutes.

The creature didn't think much of it, mostly because it wasn't equipped with the ability to think. The NDW's only role was to “stand by below the arena, wait for the signal, rise, and blow up,” so it didn't need to have any sort of thoughts.

Even its biological audio sensors were nothing but a means of knowing where it had to rise. Thus, the NDW didn't pay any heed to the people's voices...

“Magic Range Extension, Magic Power Magnification, Magic Area Designation Magnification, Magic Conceal.”

...even when someone was speaking a curious set of words.

“Now, for the MP I'll give to the magnification skills... All right, I'll go with 500,000 each.”

It sounded like delirious gibberish to those who didn't understand, and delusional nonsense to those who did.

Naturally, the NDW, not having any mind to speak of, ignored the words. But then...

“Mud Clap.”

...the very next moment, it was rendered completely immobile. It was unable to move even a single one of its many legs.

“DDRRRRRR?!”

Though the NDW couldn't think, the thoroughly unexpected event caused errors in its programming which made it release a sound much

like a shriek.

It tried moving the drill on its head, but it couldn't spin at all. In fact, the burden of even trying to move it made the drill break.

Of course, the NDW couldn't understand what was happening to it. But anyone looking at the situation from the side would surely realize that the NDW was *surrounded by ground compressed to the point of becoming ultra hard*.



The central arena's audience was astir.

It was caused by the ground below them slightly shaking.

Though earthquakes in the kingdom hadn't been all that uncommon recently, the suddenness of this shaking made the people panic slightly.

Still, since there was no aftershock, most people believed that it had been nothing but a side effect of the raging battle outside, and they quickly shifted their attention back to the broadcast.

Among the people, there was a man that muttered something inaudible while looking downwards. The turban and the skin-concealing, loose clothing he wore made him look highly Arabic.

"I used about as much as that other time... but it seems it was too much," he said and sighed. "Should've used a third of that."

His pensive face made the middle-aged spectator at his side call out to him.

"Hey, what's up, lad? Why the muttering?"

The Arabian-looking man looked back at him with a troubled expression.

"Oh, it's nothing," he said. "There was a *bug* below, and it caught my attention."

The words made the middle-aged man look at him in shock before bursting into laughter. "Ha ha ha! You care about bugs in this situation?! I can't tell if that's tough or weak! Oh well, it's not like we can do much from here! Let's just leave it to the King of Destruction and the other Masters!"

"Ahaha, yes. Let's leave it to them." The Arabian-looking man laughed and chose to watch the broadcast along with the fellow spectator.

3,000 metels under them, Franklin's final pawn, the NDW, was completely bound and unable to move.

That had been done by the basic earth spell of Mud Clap, but the insane amounts of magic used had brought its effects far beyond "basic."

The worm was equipped with a powerful tunneling ability, yet it couldn't even shake one of its legs. It was as though it was lodged into

a casket designed specifically for it.

The NDW had been rendered incapable of doing anything.

To prevent it from accidentally exploding while underground, Franklin had made sure to set it so that it would only blow up when it reached its target.

And now that it was stuck below ground, his last pawn was rendered completely useless, and a few minutes later, Xunyu used her ultimate skill to rip out its core and kill it.



Jeand Grasslands

“Just a few more minutes...” Franklin sighed and muttered after pressing the button to activate the NDW.

In Franklin’s final act of terror, his game became nothing but an event where he simply waited for the result. Regardless of whether it ended with the NDW’s explosion or his own death penalty, it was all over for him.

“There were just too many unexpected factors,” he muttered.

The Superior Killer, the RSK’s defeat, Hugo’s disaffection, and then the appearance of the King of Destruction. Though Franklin had taken measures to assure his success, the unforeseen factors had just been too many for him.

“Especially that King of Destruction. Guy’s just unfair.”

The King of Destruction’s Embryo’s artillery had destroyed both Franklin’s Suicide Series and the ground beneath. The Jeand Grasslands were grassy no longer.

“Well, at least all the shots he’s firing cost materials, just like my monsters, so it probably hurts him as much as it does me,” Franklin muttered.

He assumed that this barrage had cost the King of Destruction about 3,000,000,000 lir, which made him grin in a satisfied manner.

But at the same time, a question came to his mind.

“So... why isn’t he attacking Pandemonium, again?”

That firepower and range would’ve made short work of Franklin’s Embryo.

He considered why the man wasn’t doing it, and quickly noticed the reason at the edge of his vision.

The second princess was not far from him, sleeping at the top of Pandemonium.

That’s right, Franklin realized. He wasn’t the only one riding his Embryo — he was accompanied by one of the most important figures in the country.

The King of Destruction couldn’t use that infernal artillery when Franklin had such a hostage.

Franklin now knew the reason why he'd avoided attacking Pandemonium, but that brought him to his second question.

"Why didn't he use the Embryo from the start?"

That battleship could've easily taken care of the 5,000 monsters released first. And yet, the King of Destruction had taunted Franklin with his proclamation and gone out of his way to show off and waste time fighting the monsters without his Embryo. He'd only started using the battleship when the 50,000 monsters had been about to make their move.

It was just illogical.

Almost as if...

"He has something planned!" The moment he shouted that, a silver silhouette passed the edge of his vision.

Before he could confirm what it was, he heard hooves hit the top of Pandemonium and felt the silver silhouette land behind him.

"Mh..."

Franklin felt the ominous presence, but he was above doing anything as pathetic as hastily turning around in shock. That was mostly due to the fact that he had Life Link — the skill that transferred damage done to him over to his monsters.

DGP, KOS, and all his other minion monsters were already destroyed, but he still had Pandemonium. The Embryo was basically a giant monster, and Franklin believed that, even though King of Destruction could make short work of it, the person standing behind him couldn't damage it all that much.

Thus, with a certain degree of calmness, he slowly turned around.

"Yo. You sure have an annoying habit of charging in on the front lines, don't you... Ray?"

"Well, I still have some unfinished business," the man replied.

The man standing there was exactly who Franklin thought it would be:

Ray Starling.

Chapter Five: Game, Set, Match

Jeand Grasslands

The battle in the Jeand Grasslands was approaching its end.

The army of over 55,000 monsters was already down to half of that number, and the many Masters on the scene, especially the King of Destruction, were quickly taking care of those still standing.

Franklin also didn't have any more of his unique monsters. The RSK had been felled by Ray Starling, while DGP and KOS had been destroyed by the man's brother.

The fights in the streets of Gideon were abating, as well.

The freed monsters and the traitors had been more or less exterminated, while the King of Orchestras, the second strongest imperium Master on the scene, had been given the death penalty.

The direction of the battle was fixed, and Franklin's defeat was now inevitable.

Normally, the surviving Dryfean forces would have ended the battle by retreating, but they displayed no intention of stopping. After all, the overwhelming majority of those remaining were monsters of the Suicide Series, an army of biological weapons whose cells practically screamed for them to charge and kill until death. They were the reason why the kingdom's Masters were still fighting and why the King of Destruction's Baldr continued its infernal artillery.

Even now, the Suicide Series — and chunks of the ground, along with them — were being scattered into the wind by the battleship's bombardment.

It was happening a short distance away from the kingdom's Masters, and one of them was keenly observing the sight.

"Ray's brother's Embryo sure is something," muttered Rook to himself, feeling much like someone watching a firework show.

He wasn't alone in that. Just about every one of the low-rank Masters present on the battlefield was doing the exact same thing.

When the many high-rank Masters had escaped the barrier surrounding the central arena, the newbies had been told to stand back.

It wasn't because they would get in the way, but because the high-ranks had a consensus that the newbies had worked too hard to get the death penalty here.

Rook himself was unable to keep up with their speed without

using Union Jack or Liz's protection, so he could only agree that he had no place on the front lines.

"High firepower artillery..." he muttered. "Honestly, I'm not sure if that *fits* him all that well..."

That sentiment aside, Rook was in absolute awe at Baldr's power, proficiency, and precision. It fired countless shots, yet none of them hit Ray as he made his way towards Pandemonium.

Despite being a newbie just like Rook, Ray was still out there fighting. He'd broken through the enemy lines and gone after the leader, Franklin.

Rook had seen Ray and Shu talk to each other. The two hadn't spoken aloud, and instead had used the Telepathy Cuffs Shu'd given Ray before he'd left the arena. Nevertheless, Rook had been able to correctly assume what they'd talked about.

Ray had said that he wanted to get to Franklin atop of Pandemonium. Shu had decided to help him.

By their own will, with no hesitation to speak of, they instantly set out to do what they had to do.

Rook found it nothing short of dazzling, and observed Baldr's artillery while basking in the aftertaste of the sentiment.

Suddenly, something caught his attention.

"Hm...?"

It was somewhere in the area ravaged by Baldr's attacks.

"That's..."

Surrounded by explosions and dust, there was a familiar silhouette.

It quickly disappeared beyond the veil. Rook could easily tell that it went towards Pandemonium and fully understood the reason why.

Rook heaved a sigh, understanding that this had happened because of his carelessness. Absentminded as *she* was, he'd left her all alone without any supervision. But at the same time...

"That's much better than merely hesitating..." he murmured to himself.

...he was a bit satisfied.



"Ray Starling has arrived at the upper part of Pandemonium," Baldr reported to its Master.

"Right," Shu said as he swung his fist. It landed directly on a Suicide Series monster, instantly obliterating and making it vanish.

The unfortunate creatures stood no chance against fists that could instantly kill legendary monsters.

To add to that, his Right of Destruction negated most defensive skills and fatal damage negation effects, such as those provided by the

Lifesaving Brooch. Some of the Suicides he'd pulverized had impressive resistances, but those meant nothing before his punches. Yet the Suicides continued attacking him, showing no fear whatsoever.

Their minds weren't even equipped to consider their own lives, so they kept on charging towards Shu — towards certain death.

"Mh..." he muttered.

It was easy to describe it as disgusting and call it a day, but Shu felt like their way of existence was a brief glimpse into the mind of their creator, Franklin.

He clearly defines what he has to gain, what to discard, what to win, and what to spend for that purpose, Shu thought, feeling that Franklin was much like himself and a bit like Ray in that regard.

Shu looked up at Pandemonium, where Ray should be facing Franklin, and recalled what his brother had told him over the Telepathy Cuffs.

I have something I have to do and a question I have to ask him. Can you help me get to him?

Remembering Ray's request made Shu form a faint smile.

"You just do whatever you think you have to," he muttered as he looked up at the top of Pandemonium, towards Ray. "Whatever happens, I'll set things straight. That's my role as your big bro."



Franklin, the mastermind behind the evening's terrorist plot, was grinning.

The tables had completely turned, and the numerous monsters he had made were being exterminated by overwhelming destruction and a unified will to protect Gideon. Despite it all, Franklin stood atop his Pandemonium and faced Ray Starling with a smile on his face.

"KoD over there is doing all the needed work," he said. "You're damaged all over, Ray-boy. Why didn't you just stay back and sleep?"

Ray's appearance more or less confirmed Franklin's suspicions that the King of Destruction's strange actions were nothing but a distraction. His flashy performance had attracted Franklin's attention, allowing Ray to arrive at the top of Pandemonium.

The fact that Ray had been able to ride Silver all the way here without being caught up in the bombardment was all the proof that Franklin needed. Also, the explosions had killed all the monsters he'd positioned in the Jeand Grasslands to act as sensors. The broadcast monsters around Pandemonium were dead, as well, meaning that no one else could see Franklin face Ray.

"Still... the King of Destruction himself..." Franklin mused.

Franklin had a good reason to believe that the Superior had a

reason to help Ray. It was the name.

Along with the stats, Franklin's Analyzing Eye of Wisdom allowed him to see the name of the King of Destruction — "Shu Starling."

"Here's a question, Ray Starling," he said. "Do you know a Master called 'Shu Starling'?"

"He's my big brother," Ray answered with no hesitation.

Upon hearing that, Franklin nodded in understanding and formed a wry grin. "Two brothers and two sisters," he said. "The older ones are Superiors and the younger ones are Maiden's Masters... Helluva funny little coincidence."

"Huh...?" Ray raised an eyebrow.

"So, what's so important that you had your brother help you get to me?" Franklin asked.

"I'm here for three reasons."

"Well, that's a number. I already know one of them, though."

Franklin pointed at a part of the floor they were standing on, towards a young, unconscious girl. It was Elizabeth, the second princess of the Kingdom of Altar. "You're here to save her, aren't you? Your brother can't attack Pandemonium while she's here, right?"

Elizabeth was his enemy's Embryo's Achilles' heel. Without her, the King of Destruction would barrage Pandemonium with focused hellfire. Franklin was fully aware of that, so he was being careful not to let Ray take her.

"So what's the second thing?" he asked.

"I have a question," Ray replied.

"A question, eh?"

This was within Franklin's expectations. If Ray had only been here to save the girl, he could've done it while atop Silver, not giving Franklin a chance to react. And if Ray had only come here to defeat him, he could've hit him with a surprise attack. The fact that he'd gone out of his way to get off his horse and stand there talking meant that he was obviously here for an exchange.

"What do you want to hear about?" asked Franklin. "My recommended hunting spots? The UBM habitats I know? Or perhaps my country's internal affairs?"

Franklin had a hunch that it wasn't any of those... but...

"Why did you do this?"

But the question that actually came wasn't within his expectations.

"Why... What? Didn't I talk about my goal? Did you forget it?" Franklin shot back.

"You wanted to give the kingdom's Masters an embarrassing defeat and break the Altarian fighting spirit by showing them a devastated Gideon, right?"

“Hey, so you do remember.”

“That’s not what I’m asking, though.”

“What’s the question, then?” Franklin asked with a ridiculing look in his eyes and a jeering tone.

Ray looked directly back at him.

“What do you think of the tians?” he asked.

The question momentarily confused Franklin, but he quickly processed it and understood what it meant. “Oh, you want to know whether I think that *Infinite Dendrogram* is a world or a game?”

Ray nodded.

“I see, I see... AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!” Franklin roared with laughter.

As though broken in more ways than one, Franklin laughed out loud until he had to catch a breath.

“Anyone who thinks this is *just a game* is either a retard or a child who believes everything he’s told,” he said with the most serious expression imaginable. “A game? Like hell. The realism, the models, the *life*. Everything besides the system-related stuff is way beyond game level. Honestly, if the system weren’t there to try and convince us that we’re just playing something, none of this would look like a game.”

“Tsk...” Ray said.

“I have no idea what all of this actually is. I’d assume it’s the human experimentation phase for the creation of a national... no, worldwide virtual reality, but that’s way above our current cutting-edge tech, so I don’t think it’s likely. For all I know, those guys who say this is an actual other world or that aliens are messing with us could be right.”

“...Then what do you think of the people living here?” Ray asked slowly.

“AI with minds so sophisticated, they might as well be human. Or perhaps actual people from another world. Or maybe *life* that conforms to those boundaries. At the very least, I don’t think they’re just 1s and 0s.”

He paused.

“So I want to make this perfectly clear, bucko. If this were our Earth, if my situation, conditions, and powers were the same in real life, I’d still go through with this plan. I would act exactly the same way as I act in here. *No matter how many thousands it would kill.*” He proclaimed that with absolute certainty. “That’s what you wanted to know, isn’t it, Ray-baby? A Maiden’s Master like you just couldn’t help but wonder why I would design such an evil plot, right?”

“How could you do this?!” Ray asked with a voice wrung out from the very depths of his heart. Those were the words of someone who

recognized this world's lives as real and couldn't tolerate the tragedy that had nearly befallen them. The words didn't have a hint of theatrics or falsehood in them; they were all Ray's mind made vocal.

"Hm..." Franklin silently looked at him, finding the young man somewhat dazzling. He realized that they were alike, but completely different at the same time. With respect to that fact, Franklin chose to respond with the same honesty. "Because I never want to lose again. I've had enough of being controlled. I'll live free, create what I want, and enjoy the world as I please. No one will ever bind me. I've decided to crush anyone trying to obstruct my way of life."

He then fell silent. He didn't have anything more to say.

Franklin's words were vague, and he was probably the only one who could ever understand them. Nevertheless, the mad scientist felt that he said all he had to.

"I see how it is." Ray nodded in understanding.

To avoid defeat, Franklin wouldn't hesitate to cause tragedies, and that was exactly why he had to be defeated.

His pursuit for his way of life would bring about the most devastating of calamities, which was all the reason needed to stop him at all costs.

"Anyway, that's the second thing settled," said Franklin, his tone back to normal. "So what's the third?"

"It's th— hgh!" Ray tried to answer, but his words were cut short by Pandemonium starting to shake wildly — not because it had started to move, but it because it was being barraged by an artillery storm.

"What the... KoD is attacking?" asked Franklin, thoroughly confused. "But I still have the princess. Did he finally snap or someth...?" He stopped mid-sentence and became even more puzzled.

He'd shifted his gaze to the princess's position, and realized that she'd disappeared.

Ray wasn't the one responsible for this.

Franklin had been observing him this whole time, so he was absolutely certain that Ray hadn't been the one to take the princess. Someone else had sneaked up here, taken Elizabeth, and saved her. Franklin knew exactly which person would be capable of that.

"The Superior Killer..." he said. "So you were a decoy, too."

While Franklin had been focusing on Ray's moves and words, the Superior Killer had come up and saved the princess. He couldn't tell whether they'd planned this out, or whether the Superior Killer had merely taken advantage of Ray's actions.

Regardless of that, Pandemonium had lost the one thing protecting it from Baldr's artillery. Countless shots pierced into the factory and exploded, distorting the already-strange creature even

further and gradually bringing it to the ground.

“This sure is intense,” Franklin said as he kept himself standing by holding onto the railings installed atop of Pandemonium.

Because Ray was here, none of the attacks were hitting the top, but Franklin was more than aware that the factory would soon collapse.

Even the stat summary said that it had less than a tenth of its total HP left.

“Mh...”

Franklin’s death and Pandemonium’s destruction weren’t outside of the expected outcomes. His defeat would simply trigger Plan D. Or so it should have, but...

“They’ve taken care of it...” Franklin sighed.

A glance at the device he was holding told him that the NDW had lost its life. And Gideon remained the same. That could only mean that the central piece of the final plan, the spade, had been killed before self-destructing. It had vanished without doing any damage to speak of.

“I had a feeling this might happen,” he muttered.

The King of Destruction had been the one to show up here in the grasslands, rather than either of the Superiors from the Clash. That situation had made them into a wild card, which meant that this turn of events was entirely possible.

Normally, the spade’s underground tunneling ability would be impossible to counter, but the ultimate skill Xunyu displayed in the Clash of the Superiors would make it really easy. If Franklin had known about that ability before the Clash, he’d have prepared something else, but thinking of what-ifs was meaningless at this point.

With DGP and NDW, Franklin had now wasted two monsters made with special rewards — ones he could never make again. And with Plan D falling apart, Franklin had lost not only his chance of winning, but his chance of “not losing,” as well. If he was given the death penalty here, he’d officially suffer a crushing defeat.

Perhaps he could make it a bit less overwhelming by escaping, but...

“...It’s too late,” he muttered.

Large as it was, Pandemonium had nearly no means of fighting, and it was on the verge of being completely destroyed.

The Castling monsters he’d positioned all over the Jeand Grasslands had been thoroughly exterminated, too. Franklin’s death penalty was imminent.

After all... Ray was charging straight towards him.

Not even wasting his time getting on Silver, he dashed on his own two feet, showing no hesitation whatsoever about Baldr’s barrage.

I guess he expected these attacks, Franklin thought. *Well, they're brothers, after all. They probably agreed on this or just knew what the other would do without even having to talk it through... I'm kinda jealous.* Feeling a little bit sentimental, Franklin breathed a light sigh.

"So the third reason you're here is to kill me," he muttered.

Ray gradually closed the distance between them, but Franklin had no means of doing anything about it. He'd already used up all the custom monsters in his arsenal, so there was no one to protect him now.

Very well. I'll accept this defeat. He gave up and prepared himself for his death penalty. *But someday, I'll...*

At that moment, a silhouette arrived at the top of Pandemonium.

"Hgh!" Ray exclaimed in surprise.

"Eh?" Franklin voiced his confusion. The silhouette was a half-broken Magingear. Much of its metallic armor was lost, and it was only complete because of the frozen coating. It was the unit piloted by Hugo and armed with Cocytus.

"Kh..."

If the Magingear had been a person, the damage would surely have killed it.

Some of the damage had been caused by his battle against Rook's group, but he'd gained most of it after undoing La Porte de l'Enfer and letting the Masters fight the monsters. There was no way he could have remained unscathed while breaking through the veil of fiery destruction created by Baldr's artillery.

Despite being more damaged than the Magingear he'd used against Gouz the day prior, this Magingear was still able to move.

"AAARRGHHHH!" the pilot roared. It was a voice that the roleplayer acting as a chivalrous knight would never use.

With that, the Magingear stood right before Ray, as though to protect Franklin.



Hugo had spent much of the time until and during the plan doing nothing but doubting himself. He'd wondered whether he should participate in the plan, whether he was right in doing what he'd chosen to, and whether he should face Ray, who was a friend from the day before.

While he was doubting himself, he'd been defeated by Rook, heard his words, and seen Franklin begin Plan C, filling him with even more doubts.

While hesitating, he had undone La Porte de l'Enfer's Frozen debuff that was trapping the Masters near the western gate. He'd done that instantly, without thinking it through.

Hugo had thought that he couldn't let things continue as they were, but even then, he hadn't been sure if it had been the right thing to do. That action had helped stop the tragedy before his eyes, but it had been a move against Franklin — the person Hugo so greatly admired.

Then, in the midst of those doubts, Hugo had remembered that Franklin had lied and planned to destroy Gideon, which filled him with even more doubt.

Once Rook and the other Masters had gone out to the Jeand Grasslands and left him alone, the Charm effect had disappeared, and he had hesitated further still.

But then, all of a sudden, Hugo had stopped thinking and doubting himself.

He'd realized that he couldn't do anything if he'd spent all his time hesitating.

Once all the doubts and self-questioning went away, he'd arrived at a single, ultimate answer for what he had to do.

It was the answer that was always inside Hugo and the girl controlling him, Yuri.

It was...



"I'll protect my sister!"

With those words, the Magingear began moving.

"Even if I have to defeat you!" The frame was on the verge of shattering, and it only held together because of Cocytus. Nevertheless, the icy machine soldier charged towards Ray. Though he had been a friend the day prior, Hugo brought everything he had to his attack.

"Bring it, Hugo," Ray said, ready to face him.

He didn't know Hugo and Franklin's relationship. But as an opponent and as a friend, he wanted to face him properly.

With that, the Paladin and the High Pilot... the two Maiden's Masters... clashed.

It was their second battle since the one at the western gate, and surely the last one they'd have today. The clash seemed to last no more than a blink of an eye.

"Motor... Slash!" Hugo roared. His Magingear raised its right arm and tried to attack with a swing of the icy cross-sword. "...Hgh! Kh!"

That single motion was the straw that broke the camel's back. The frost armor in the area broke apart, the whole right arm was dislodged from the torso, and the power of the swing made it fly off into the distance.

It was the same arm that had suffered from Ray's Vengeance and the Devil-Dragon-Man's Tri-Horn Grand Dash. The many powerful

attacks it'd gone through had brought it to its limit, and the skill just now had gone past it.

"Not yet! Motor Slash!" Hugo roared again as he instantly used the skill with his other arm. The icy blade went right towards Ray, ready to split him.

"I can't break through the armor like this," said Ray. "Then I'll just...!"

He loosened his grip on his black longsword, Nemesis, and threw her up into the air. Then he bent his body to avoid the sharp cross-blade and *extended his right arm into its path.*

"Gh...!"

The frozen blade cleanly cut it off, dealing great damage to Ray and making him bleed. However, the sharpness of the weapon made it so that the impact didn't blow him away.

"Hgh...!" Ray exclaimed as he, still bent, moved to the Magingear's side.

As he did that, Nemesis fell back towards him.

However, with his left arm being charred and his right arm being completely lost, he had no means of holding her hilt.

Or so they thought.

"Hh...!" Ray exclaimed.

"What?!" Hugo shouted.

His surprise wasn't without reason, for Ray had *bitten into Nemesis' hilt with his teeth.*

"Mfh...!" Ray couldn't say a word, but...

"Very well!" said Nemesis, having read his mind.

Ray moved his head in a way that made the greatsword in his teeth reach into the frozen armor coating the Magingear's cockpit. It wasn't enough to break through, but that didn't matter at all.

"Vengeance... Is Mine!" said Nemesis, activating the skill.

The counterattack doubled the damage Ray had suffered and delivered it into the frozen armor, instantly making it vanish. Without anything to protect him, the black blade dug into Hugo's chest and pierced his heart.

"Ah..." he breathed his last before becoming particles of light and vanishing out of this world. His Embryo, Cocytus, disappeared soon after, leaving nothing but the remains of the badly damaged Magingear.

"Argh!" Ray roared.

He was done with Hugo, but he still had some unfinished business. Nemesis fell out of his mouth as he charged towards his target — Franklin.



The mad scientist didn't even run... or perhaps he even forgot to do it upon seeing Hugo vanish.

"Frank...lin...!"

Ray had lost his right arm and even let go of Nemesis, yet he still dashed towards Franklin. After all, he was facing the very reason why he was here, his ultimate goal for coming to this place.

Ray wasn't here just to save the princess or to present Franklin with his question. In fact, even defeating him was a secondary goal. He was here for something he'd decided he'd do long ago.

I'd like to punch that idiot for sending a kid to a place this dangerous. My fist is going straight into your face. Keep it clean for me, Superior.

Indeed — Ray only wanted to punch him.

"FRANKLIIIIIINN!" Ray forced his charred right fist into Franklin's left cheek, finally settling the score.

"GHAH?!" Franklin exclaimed.

The power of the impact caused Ray's fragile arm to begin crumbling. But the moment it hit Franklin's face, the Miasmaflame Gauntlets released a burst of flame that spread across the mad scientist's body, quickly turning him into a human torch.

Franklin no longer had a Lifesaving Brooch or any monsters he could use for Life Link. The purgatorial fires made short work of his mediocre HP, and he soon began to vanish.

"Kgh..." Just as he was about to be taken by this world's rules and disappear, Franklin opened his mouth and spoke. "We'll win next time."

And with those words as his last, he became particles of light.



Thus, the Dryfean Superior that had designed and executed this nightmarish plan upon the people of the kingdom vanished at the hands of a single newbie.

With that, the incident was settled.

Or perhaps this outcome had been set in stone long ago, when a certain Superior had tried to use a certain little girl, and a certain newbie had tried to help her.



Twenty minutes after Franklin's disappearance, the last of the Suicide Series were downed, ending the battle at Gideon.

Traitors working under Franklin were dead or deserted.

The Suicide Series was thoroughly exterminated.

The club, King of Orchestras, Veldorbell, was dead.

The spade, NDW, was dead.

The heart, High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps, was dead.

The diamond, Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, was dead.

Thus marked the end of the terrorism at the city of duels.

Franklin's Game was over.

Epilogue A: The Superiors

Journalist/Death Shadow, Marie Adler

A few hours had passed since Franklin's annoying little game, and dawn was only a few moments away.

Tonight, I'd fought the King of Orchestras, gathered and broken the devices all over Gideon, protected the city against the Suicide Series, broken through the King of Destruction's bombing to get on Pandemonium, saved Ellie, and handed her unconscious body to what remained of the Royal Guard.

Naturally, I was thoroughly drained, especially since it was the second night in a row I'd been running around doing stuff. Sure, my Superior Job gave me some great stats, but even so, I had my limits.

I definitely wasn't the only one who had found this night to be highly taxing. Ray and Rook had gone through a number of harsh battles, as well. In fact, Ray had even lost both of his arms.

Franklin's death penalty made Pandemonium vanish, making Ray fall towards the ground below. Thankfully, he was saved by Nemesis and their Prism Steed, which was named "Silver," apparently.

The girl picked up Ray's right arm, and the Masters on the scene were able to put it back on him using high-rank healing magic. It would take a few days until he would be able to move it as smoothly as before, but it wasn't that big of a problem. However, I couldn't say the same for his left arm.

It had been completely Charred and crumbled to pieces because of it, so retrieving it was impossible at this point. And loss of body parts couldn't be fixed by mere high-rank healing magic.

Now, high-rank Embryo ultimate skills would probably do the trick, but as far as I was aware, the kingdom didn't have any high-ranks whose ultimates were focused on healing others.

There was *one* person who'd be able to heal Ray's wound. The High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso, a Superior Job from the priest grouping and an owner of a Superior Embryo, could give Ray his arm back in the blink of an eye.

But I couldn't recommend relying on her.

She was the head of a cult, and the prospect of being indebted to her was nothing short of frightening. Worst case scenario, it could even go beyond *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Considering these circumstances, I'd recommended that he just

take the death penalty, since that would have him return completely healed.

However, Ray had shown no intention of doing so, giving me the wild response that, "I still have my right arm, and I found out I can even use my mouth if I have to. I can make this work."

Upon hearing him mention using his mouth, Nemesis had put on a distant look and muttered "Does that count as a kiss...?"

Personally, I thought that biting into the hilt of her greatsword form had been quite unlike kissing.

Anyway, following that exchange, Ray had basically collapsed and logged off, making it obvious just how drained he was, both physically and mentally. No one could fault him for it.

Rook was quite tired, as well, so he'd logged off right after feeding Liz some mithril to restore her volume.

And so, I'd ended up being the only one of our party still online to greet the dawn.

I was extremely sleepy myself, but as both a Journalist and a manga artist, I just couldn't miss this beautiful opportunity to collect quality material.

I mean, it's not every day you get to be on the scene of a settled terrorist incident, I thought.

Anyway, time for a rundown of all that had happened.

Approximately one hour after the last of the Suicide Series was exterminated, Count Gideon declared that the trouble was officially over.

With Ellie saved and Franklin's forces destroyed, he had no reason not to.

Well, there were some player killers that had escaped, but none of them would be stupid enough to do anything at this point, likely because they were afraid of being erased by the King of Destruction or the Super Gladiator.

Speaking of the King of Destruction, Count Gideon had stated that he planned to reward him, Ray, and all the other Masters that had helped take care of the incident. I'd found that surprising, considering he also had to pay for city repairs. It was hard to tell whether he was just *that* rich or simply a good guy.

Thinking about city repairs made me wonder how much it would cost to fix the area destroyed by me and King of Orchestras and...

Yeah, I probably don't want to know, I thought.

As far as I was aware, the damage there had likely been greater than anywhere else, and I couldn't be more thankful for the fact that they didn't know who was responsible.

Anyway, after Gideon's declaration, the people reacted in two ways.

The knights, guards, and other public officials became busy with damage reports and other post-incident business, while the civilians and Masters took to revelry.

It was only to be expected. Franklin had ruined their big event and replaced it with a night of dread, so merrymaking was the natural response to seeing the man responsible for that defeated so thoroughly.

Masters aside, I was quite impressed by the quick recovery from the civilians.

I guess duel city folk are befittingly hardy, I thought.

Still, once the sky turned bright, a significant number of carts and dragon carriages were seen leaving Gideon, and I couldn't really fault them for that. After all, even the so-called strongest city in the kingdom, the one farthest away from the imperium, hadn't been safe from such an incident. It was only natural to expect some merchants to be scared into taking their riches and leaving for another country.

They were most likely heading to Caldina, so this incident had actually ended up being beneficial to them. Not exactly an unexpected effect, but still.

Hm? Now that I think about it, this war was really profitable to them, I thought.

Not only was Caldina the primary destination for wealthy refugees, they'd also experienced a boost in trade with Altar. Naturally, the kingdom wasn't exporting any of its food to Dryfe, so Caldina was there to buy it all up.

Altar hadn't been left without its share of goods, either. Caldina had sold them lots of war-like wares, such as magic items from Huang He or weapons from Tenchi.

But enough about them. Really, it was only natural for the "land of merchants" to take advantage of such a situation.

Back to the aftermath of Franklin's game.

He'd intended to display the powerlessness of the kingdom's Masters, to break the country's fighting spirit and to have it merge with Dryfe through "diplomacy" before the war had a chance to restart.

However, thanks to the hard work from the newbies and the Masters that hadn't been caught by the barrier, Plans A and B had completely failed.

The most significant event during this interval had been the broadcasted battle between Ray and Franklin's unique monster, as it had had the exact opposite of the intended effect. Though Franklin had planned to completely crush him and break his spirit, Ray had achieved a miraculous victory which had uplifted the masses.

That battle had been quite popular among us Masters, too, gaining

lots of replies and comments on related discussion boards and video sites.

It was the third biggest *Infinite Dendrogram*-related news story, with the first obviously being the King of Destruction's appearance in the spotlight and his fight against Franklin, and the second being Figaro and Xunyu's Clash of the Superiors.

This incident was sure to get Ray a nickname or two. In fact, people were already exchanging ideas both here and in real-life discussion boards. There was even a meeting going on in the central plaza regarding that.

Normally, such meetings were only held for people who made their debut in the arenas, but this time, they were gathering nickname suggestions for Ray, Rook, and King of Destruction, who was no longer "Unknown."

The proposed nicknames for Ray included, but weren't limited to: "Dark Paladin," because he was a Paladin that certainly didn't look like one; "Prince on the Silver Steed," obviously because he'd been riding Silver; and "The Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson," which made me wonder about the mind behind such a... polarizing name.

Any of those would probably make Ray want to crawl into a hole.

Still, there were some simple, fitting ones that I personally really liked.

Anyway, back to the results of Franklin's plot.

Following the failure of Plan B, Franklin had started Plan C, which had been significantly worse than the other two, clearly designed to show that "resistance will only make it worse." I and a few other Masters had been there to buy some time, but it was clear that we wouldn't have been able to hold for long, and the damage would've been great.

Enter the King of Destruction, who had instantly turned it all around.

The thousands of monsters that had been meant to overrun Gideon had become nothing but punching bags for the King of Destruction to show off his power.

Franklin had intended to show just how powerless the kingdom's Masters were, but had ended up doing the exact opposite. At the very least, it was now clear that the kingdom wouldn't go down without a fight.

But it was hard to say that it'd been a good thing for the country.

This incident had not only displayed the power of the kingdom's Masters, but also confirmed a certain truth that was on the minds of the country's people... and just about everyone else in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Basically, a war force with Superiors was on a completely different level than one without.

A Superior was capable of razing an entire city, or perhaps even a whole country.

Franklin had created monsters that surpassed 50,000 in number, while the King of Destruction had completely annihilated them all. Evidently, they had only been able to have a proper fight because they were both Superiors, while the rest of us were only waiting to be massacred.

It was more obvious than ever that a Superior could only be countered by another Superior.

Of course, there were exceptions, among which was my avatar, Marie Adler.

Marie had a Superior Job, but she wasn't a Superior because she didn't have a Superior Embryo, and the reason why she'd received the nickname "Superior Killer" was because she'd defeated a Superior and sent the criminal to the gaol.

Mind you, that victory had been the result of many factors, such as my abilities, the Superior's abilities, various conditions, and a lot of tactics. All of them had come together, letting me emerge victorious against the King of Plagues, Candy Carnage — a wide-scale suppression type, wide-scale extermination type Master bearing the title of "the greatest tian murderer" and the nickname of "Legions Lost."

...Honestly, I still find it hard to believe I won, I thought.

Back to war matters. The kingdom had been thoroughly devastated in the previous war because there had been no one to counter the imperium's Superiors. In this incident, the kingdom had won because it had the King of Destruction, effectively proving that the outcome of a war was decided by the presence of Superiors or the lack of it. Because of this, the main thing to consider in the next war was the number of Superiors that would participate.

The imperium would obviously have the three that already had accolades from the previous war: the very familiar Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, "The Weakest, The Worst"; Hell General, Logan Goddhart, the "Contradictory Equation"; and King of Beasts, the "Physically Strongest."

If nothing changed, they would be the only ones, but we also had to consider that the imperium had won the previous war event and had given great rewards to those who performed well, so it was reasonable to expect more Superiors to switch to Dryfe.

The kingdom, on the other hand, would only have two, at best: Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts, who came online at highly irregular times, and the King of Destruction, whose appearance in the spotlight

had made it safe to expect him to participate. Those two could easily drop to one if Lei-Lei wasn't online on the day of the war.

Of course, they weren't the only Superiors in the kingdom.

The kingdom also had the Over Gladiator, Figaro. He was symbol of the duel city and the one who'd just won against Xunyu, a foreign Superior.

Then there was the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso — the leader of the largest clan in the kingdom and the user of the Lunar Divider Field, said to be the most wicked skill one could face in a large-scale battle.

If they were to participate, they would be an invaluable force against the imperium.

However, Figaro was widely known as a pure solo player, so it was clear he had no intention to take part in a battle involving great numbers. Tsukuyo Fuso, too, had refused to participate because the kingdom hadn't accepted her downright unreasonable condition — to make her cult's teachings into the state religion.

The former was tough on his policy, while the latter was a highly demanding Princess Kaguya, making their participation extremely unlikely.

In fact, Tsukuyo might even switch to the imperium if they accepted her condition that the kingdom wouldn't.

Not to mention that Dryfe also had more non-Superior forces, both Masters and tians.

The kingdom wouldn't go down without a fight, but a defeat still seemed completely inevitable.

I wonder what the Superiors themselves think about this, I pondered.



Duel city Gideon, twelfth district, King of Destruction, Shu Starling

"Man, am I tired," I grumbled. "I need some booze to bear it."

"Good job back there," said Figgy. "Drink all you want. It's on me. You too, Xunyu."

"ThanKs," she replied. "I'm underAge, though, so I'll just haVE some juice."

I and two fellow Superiors were sitting around the table, enjoying some drinks. We were in a private room of a high-quality club in Gideon's twelfth district.

Figgy had reserved this place ahead of time. He'd planned to use it right after the Clash, but thanks to a certain shthead in a lab coat, we'd ended up coming here long after his reserved time was up. Thankfully, the store had been kind enough to allow him to use this room after the incident was over.

I was kinda impressed by the management's professionalism. Not

everyone had the guts to continue working in this situation.

“Honestly, I’m pretty glad we have this place,” I voiced my thoughts. “If we were outside, the number of people around us would be unbearable.”

Mind you, I had run riot in a completely different get-up than I was in now, so maybe they wouldn’t realize it was me. The Scandinavian berserker-like clothing was easy to move around in, but the costumes I wore always made me feel calm.

“Yeah, that’s exactly why I reserved it,” said Figgy. “Sure, we could just log out, but a good battle always makes me want to cool off like this.”

“I get whAT you mean,” Xunyu joined in. “But man, this place has sOme good juice.” She emptied her glass and ordered some more.

Well, if that ain’t an action befitting her age, I thought. *I really don’t know how to feel about her being twice as tall as me.*

“The face under the talisman and the Voice Changing Fu made me suspicious, but you really *are* a kid, aren’t you?” I asked.

“I’m turning ten this yEAR,” she answered. “That’s doubLE digits, so I’m now a prOper lady.”

“Really, now?” I said.

Her excessively long limbs might’ve been the result of a desire to travel far and a wish to grow up. Humpty, the control AI for Embryos, could probably give a more detailed analysis, but all she ever did was lead me to trouble or watch me struggle to take care of it.

“What are your plans now, Xunyu?” asked Figgy.

“I still have a jOb to protect the prince, so I’ll be stAYing in the capital,” she answered. “Guess I’ll also rAid the kingdom’s dUNgeons.” The items you could get from doing so differed depending on the country you were in, so that was a good idea.

...Speaking of items, I still had to stock up on materials for Baldr’s ammo. It’d cost me roughly 3,300,000,000 lir.

“Oh, but rAiding alone can be prEtty hard, especially whEN going deep into a creAted dungeon,” Xunyu added.

You’d have to be Figgy to effectively raid dungeons by yourself. Not to mention that you’d also have to have an Embryo you could chat with just to make it more bearable.

“Coming wiTH?” she asked.

“I’m exclusively solo,” Figgy replied.

“And I’m not leaving Gideon fur a while,” I said.

“Man, you guYs are cold.”

I can’t just leave while that walking bomb is still here, I thought.

“If you want, I can introduce you to some duel rankers here,” Figgy said, proposing an alternative. “They’ll probably want to spar with you, too.”

"Then should I set you up with the kill rankers I know?" I joined in. "Oh, but I don't know bear they are."

I wonder what Catherine Kongou's up to, I thought.

"Yeah, thAt'll help a lot." Xunyu nodded. "Wait, uhh... Figaro is the kingdOM's no. 1 duelist, while the beAr is no. 1 in the kill rankings, rigHt?"

"Yes," Figgy nodded.

"Bearily so," I said and did the same.

Oh boy, I know where this is going...

"Then how aboUT the no. 1 in clan raNKin—"

"Avoid her," Figgy and I simultaneously cut her words short.

"...Is she trOUble?" she asked.

In response, we both simply nodded.

We were unfortunate enough to already be acquainted with that shady cultist fox, and I honestly believed that a person was better off not meeting her. Ever.

"I see hOW it is," Xunyu continued. "Looks like every country's top clan owner is bad news."

"Come on, that's a bit of an exaggeration..." I began. "Wait, is it?"

The kingdom's fox... Nope.

The imperium's lab coat shithead... Nope.

Granvaloa's military nerd... Nope.

Legendaria's masked lover of little boys and girls... That one deserved a red card.

I didn't know much about Tenchi's, and Xunyu's words implied that Huang He's was no good, either.

Well, damn, there actually wasn't a single decent clan top anywhere.

The owner of Caldina's Sefirot seemed okay, but he was somewhat scary. Like a rabbit living with a pride of lions.

Oh, speaking of Caldina...

"Hey, this is unrelated, but... did anyone in the arena make a move?" I asked.

My question would've been unclear to most, but it was more than enough for the two I was talking to.

"I crushed the cORE of the thing below bEfore it could do anYthing, and it was all ovER," said Xunyu.

"The Physically Strongest didn't do anything," added Figgy. "But Caldina's Magically Strongest got involved, apparently."

Did he just say "apparently"? "Why the uncertainty?"

"The mONster I killed wasn't moVing at all," Xunyu answered. "I later used the skill tO dig through the dirt arOUnd it and... herE."

She put something on the table. It was about the size of a pebble and looked very much like one, too.

I took it in hand and grasped it with about a tenth of my strength, but that wasn't enough to break it.

"Hnrgh!" I grunted as I used a third of my STR, approximately 60,000, which finally made it break. "It's dirt made by binding magic he enhanced several times over. Makes sense why the thing couldn't move."

It's like being in a skintight coffin, I thought. I know it well. The guy did it to me once...

"I'm not too smart, so I don't really get it," said Figgy. "Why did they come here, anyway?"

"To watCH our battle, obviousLY," Xunyu answered. "I don't kNOW why the Physically Strongest didn't heLP the lab coat. They're bOth from Dryfe, aftER all."

"Mh..." I fell silent and pondered.

I'd known about the other Superiors in the audience before Figaro's and Xunyu's match even began. I'd even told Figgy about them.

Their presence here hadn't been strange at all. It was only natural for Superiors to investigate the abilities of other Superiors, since they were their primary opponents in this world. UBM hunting, special events, war — there were many situations in which Superiors could compete against other Superiors, so knowing their abilities ahead of time was never a bad thing.

So it was only natural for them to come and observe a duel between two Superiors, and honestly, it was strange that we hadn't had anyone from Legendaria here. The country was as much of a neighbor as Dryfe and Caldina.

Figaro and Xunyu had both been fully aware that they were being put under the magnifying glass, and they most likely hadn't used the aces up their sleeves. Figgy hadn't shown his ultimate skill — which not even I knew about — and though Xunyu had used hers, it was clear that she was still hiding something.

That aside...

"This is just a guess," I spoke up. "But I think the Physically Strongest, the King of Beasts, came here with a goal unrelated to Franklin's plot, while the Magically Strongest, The Earth, came here because he knew that Franklin was about to terrorize Gideon."

"...Isn't thAt the other way arouND?" asked Xunyu, and it was a reasonable question.

But...

"The King of Beasts is widely considered to be the strongest being in all the three western countries. If Franklin's terror plot involved her, then it would've also been designed around her," I said.

The fact that Franklin's Game had been so layered and focused so

much on using as few of his forces as possible made it obvious that the King of Beasts hadn't been working for him.

"The Earth, on the other hand, intervened with one of Franklin's plans, making it safe to believe that he came here for this reason. Mind you, this is less about him and more about Caldina. They wouldn't like it if Dryfe merged with Altar, since separated countries are easier to manipulate."

Caldina was surrounded by four land countries and Granvaloa. Having two of them become one would be a huge problem for them, so they'd obviously do something to prevent that.

Though, in the end, they were probably planning to take advantage of the all-out war and take off with all the spoils. It wasn't hard to imagine Caldina invading and conquering weakened countries.

Anyway, the fact that they'd sent The Earth made it clear just how serious they were about this. Honestly, it was entirely possible that he would've done something if I hadn't been on the scene. If that had happened, Jeand Grasslands probably would've had to be renamed "Jeand Desert," "Jeand Wastelands," or "Jeand Swamplands."

Well... not like it was much of a grassland now that I was done with it. My Baldr had blown it sky-high.

"But mAn... The Physically StrONgest and the Magically StronGest, eh?" Xunyu muttered. "Are they reAlly such a big deal? I've never foUght either."

"I've heard that Shu here fought The Earth," said Figgy.

"Oh yeAh, I've heard of those rumORs, too. Which of you wOn?"

That had happened some time before the war... about a year ago in *Dendro* time.

"We tied, I guess?"

"You 'guEss'? What do yOU mean?"

"Exactly what I said. A tie. No clear winner. Match invalid. We pawisitively had to stop because of a third party."

"...What kind of thiRD party could intervene in thAT battle?"

Right when we'd been about to finish it, Humpty and the environment control AI had come over and told us off.

Honestly, we'd probably deserved it, since our battle had completely destroyed a created dungeon.

Anyway, *The Earth*, eh...? I thought.

I said, "If he came all the way here, he could've at least said hi."



East of duel city Gideon, Cruella Mountain Belt

The Cruella Mountain Belt was one of the border zones between the Kingdom of Altar and the great desert country of Caldina, and it was one of the trade routes connecting Gideon and the city-states of

the commercial union.

Dawn was about to break as several dragon carriages traced the mountainous paths of the belt. Each and every one of them belonged to Caldinian merchants. Since their country was a land of deserts, they had decided to make some distance by leaving early, when the sun wasn't high up and the heat was easier to bear.

A certain man was riding one of the dragon carriages. He looked much like any of the merchants he shared the vehicle with. The only difference was the crest on the back of his left hand — the sign of a Master.

Snacking on a smoked chicken sandwich, he gazed at the mountains and forests that would soon be bathed in the light of dawn.

"This sure is tasty," he muttered.

The smoked food he was eating had been given to him by the spectator sitting next to him during last night's Clash. Once the act of terror had ended, the middle-aged man, who'd been as high spirited as anyone else, had taken some of the smoked goods from the shop he owned and presented them to him.

The man in the carriage had put the smoked goods between some of his leftover bread and made his way to Caldina while relishing the curious mix of midnight snack and breakfast.

"A smoked chicken sandwich," he said to himself. "I should get our leader to make this sometime."

Remembering the leader of the clan he belonged to, the man realized something and reached into his inventory.

"Umm, the souvenirs are... all here," he said. "I have something for everyone except Moneygold. I don't intend to spend a single lir on him... but he should be satisfied with the video of last night's battle."

He nodded to himself while mumbling things not uncommon for travelers... and mixing it with things no common traveler would understand.

"Magic Activation Acceleration — instant; Magic Multi-Activation — 28... no, 143; Magic Conceal; Magic Range Extension — 8,000 metels... Bottomless Pit."



In the Cruella Mountain Belt, a certain group was watching the Caldinian merchant carriages. All of them were crest-bearing Masters and members of the PK clan known as "Goblin Street."

"Those look like merchants from Caldina, boss," one of them said. "What do we do?"

No response. The one he talked to, the King of Burglary, Eldridge, closed his eyes in silent thought.

Most of the clan's members had left Caldina and come to do their

business as indiscriminate bandits here in the kingdom. The group's crimes during the blockade incident had been limited to the Masters and tians of the kingdom, so although they were wanted by Altar, they had yet to get on Caldina's list. However, that would surely happen if they attacked these Caldinian merchant carriages and left survivors who could tell the tale.

On the other hand...

It might be time to leave the kingdom for good, he thought.

Before switching to this area, they'd worked near the capital, where every member besides Eldridge, who hadn't been online, had been completely annihilated by Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts.

After coming here, things hadn't gotten any better, as they all — Eldridge included — had been killed by Xunyu the Yinglong. That incident had made some members lose faith in Eldridge, and the clan's numbers had dropped by half.

Given the members lost at the capital and the ones who'd left on their own, the clan's situation wasn't too good. Still, it all might just be a sign that it was time to drop this place and try finding prey somewhere different.

"We'll attack those carriages," he said.

"Really?" his clan member asked.

"Yeah." Eldridge nodded. "And once we're done with them, we're moving to Granvaloa... to the sea. Enough banditry. It's time to try the pirate life."

He turned towards his clan and formed an indomitable smile.

"Let's go! Say goodbye to Caldina! We'll make some bank with these and ditch that sandbox for good!"

His words made the members still with him all fired up.

"Yeah!"

"Hell yeah!"

"When this attack is over, I'm becoming a pirate!"

Right after they said those things, *a large hole appeared right under their feet*.

"Ah?!" Eldridge gasped as he jumped away, avoiding the hole.

His clan members weren't as lucky. They all fell in, were buried alive, and left the world due to death penalty.

"What happened?!" he shouted.

No one could hear him in these empty mountains, but even so, he couldn't hold himself back from voicing his shock.



"One of them avoided it," muttered the man in the carriage. "Let's make it a bit bigger, then... Earth Eater."



Eldridge ran through the mountains.

Something strange was happening.

He was obviously under attack, but he couldn't see his enemies or any signs that they were attacking.

He was even more confused than he had been during his battle — if you could call it that — with Xunyu. Still, he was able to run away using his high stats and powerful intuition.

But he soon noticed something strange.

"It's... far?" he murmured.

The sky seemed distant, as though it had become higher.

The nearby mountains seemed taller, as well.

Eldridge found it strange, as he had yet to go down the belt.

Soon enough, he was *surrounded by dirt walls from every direction*.

No — that wasn't the case...

"Th-This mountain is sinking into the ground...!" he cried.

Indeed it was. The mountain was going down much like an elevator.

Puzzled and perplexed, Eldridge tried to think of what could be responsible for this.

"I-Is this Caldina's The Ear—?!"

Before he could finish his sentence, the sunken mountain he was on was *crunched* by the surrounding ground and sand, instantly giving him the death penalty.



"...Oh, I leveled up," muttered the man in the carriage. "Was there someone strong among them?"

An earthy smell rode the wind and reached the carriages, but none of the merchants noticed. Oblivious to the sudden and silent disappearance of a nearby mountain, they simply continued chatting.

"Oh, I'm so glad this trade route is safe to use now," said one of them.

"Truly," another agreed. "I hear some Masters took care of the bandits in the area just the day before yesterday. What a helpful bunch."

They didn't know. While the Gouz-Maise Gang, the most infamous bandit group in the area, had been thoroughly destroyed, there were many more bandits lurking in the mountain belt.

They didn't know. A group of PK bandits had been aiming to attack them for their goods and wealth.

They didn't know. The group and all the other bandits in the surrounding mountains — a number of people surpassing the triple

digits — had been buried alive, in the blink of an eye, by just a single person.

They didn't know. They were sharing a carriage with the one they called the "Magically Strongest."

Confirmed the elimination of all threats in the surrounding area, he thought. Setting a two kilometel auto-interception zone.

Fatoum. He was the bearer of that nickname and the owner of the Superior Job "The Earth." He ran his mind through those mechanical-sounding words and activated an automatic interception barrier.

Even so, no one in the carriage noticed.

The immense amount of MP he'd put into Magic Conceal made it impossible to detect. Even the experienced tian guards were thoroughly clueless.

I must admit, my visit to the kingdom lasted far longer than I expected, he thought.

Done with his job, he'd switched his thoughts from battle mode back to normal.

At first, it was just a trip to investigate the UBM's and Ruins in the country while also setting some slow-acting magic, but then the King of Toys suggested I arrange the blockade terror around the royal capital.

Fatoum ran his mind through the incident which involved a culprit still unknown to the people of the kingdom.

To top it off, I then received information about Dryfe's terror plot in Gideon and had to go there to stop it. Dear me, what a long trip this ended up being... I hope she's not too mad.

His visit to the kingdom had taken almost a month longer than expected. That fact made him picture his wife, who was waiting for him back in Caldina.

Well, I have the souvenirs, and I guess I can make it up to her by taking her out on a nice date.

The Magically Strongest, Caldina's most powerful force, was thinking things you'd expect of a busy salaryman.

I must admit, the Clash of the Superiors was truly an excellent battle, well worth watching. And thanks to Franklin, I even got to see Shu fight again. It's been far too long since last time. Which made Fatoum remember a certain detail.

"Oh, I completely forgot to greet him," he said. "But that might've been a good thing."

Regardless of the circumstances, he simply couldn't greet his old acquaintance. After all...

"Meeting him would just make me want to fight him. And, well..."
...it's far too early to destroy that city.

No city would stand after a battle between him and Shu.

With that thought on his mind, the Strongest that had sneaked

into Altar returned back to Caldina, leaving the kingdom with a few of his tricks.

Epilogue B: The Sisters

*Imperial capital outskirts, headquarters of the Triangle of Wisdom,
High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps*

The Dryfe Imperium's capital, Vandelheim, had two faces.

One was that of a city from 19th century Europe. These days, you could only see such townscapes in the simple, black and white photos from that era. Though it was at the technological forefront here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, it was nothing but retro to Earthlings living in 2045.

That was one of Vandelheim's two faces, while the other could be demonstrated by the sight before me.

"GHAAH!" one person panicked. "The new amphibious model has sunk into the pool! It ain't going up!"

"Oh, out of MP, eh?" said another. "It uses magic engines for both oxygen generation and the anti-pressure barrier, so that's kinda to be expected."

"Looks like we'll have to use conventional chemistry for the oxygen supply and fight the pressure with better design and materials," a third one joined in. "We can't just try to solve everything with magic. We're dealing with robots here."

"Be serious, people! Help me get Zerbahl Type M out of there!"

"Glubglubglub..." the one in the sunken robot mumbled unintelligibly.

"Oh, it's not exactly airtight, either."

"Looks like there's water inside. A problem with the gaskets or the frame, I assume?"

"YOU GUYS!"

"GLUBGLUB, I'M DYING!"

The one panicking at the side of the ten-meter-deep experiment pool was Zerbahl, an Engineer. The two observing the results as they gathered data and worked on something were Flosch and Roboroman, both Mechanics. I wasn't too sure about the one drowning in the water, but it was probably one of our Pilots, Kuromiki.

"Excuse me," a girl spoke to two of our members. "The custom Marshal II requested by the military seems to be constructed, but how was it supposed to be painted, again?"

"Well, they said something about red, so I think that's the color we should use on the whole thing," said one of them. "Let's give it a

horn, too.”

“We don’t need no horn,” said the other. “Our communication devices don’t require any antennas. Also, we’re only painting the shoulders.”

“...Hey now, a base dark green Marshal II with red shoulders is way too basic.”

“Well, I could say the same about a purely red Marshal II with a goddamn novelty horn.”

“It doesn’t matter, you two, just—”

“IT DOES MATTER!” they both shouted simultaneously.

“Eek!”

The girl with the report in her hands was Luphia, a tian working in our general affairs section. The two people pushing their own policies — tastes, more like — in response to the presented demands were the Painters, MS Geomad and Assault Tripper.

“Oh, yeah. Apparently, our leader went out to do something, lost, and came back,” said one person in another group of three.

“Got sauce for that?” asked another.

“MMO Journal Planter.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve been so busy with my designs and tests that I forgot to check it.”

“Same here, aheheheh,” the third person laughed in a strange manner.

“How many days behind are you?”

“Five.”

“I win. I’m at seven.”

“...Is that really a victory, though?”

The three were pulling consistent all-nighters both here and in reality, and yet — though they were doing it with mad-looking grins on their faces — they still had the capacity to construct Magingears. They were High Engineers: Boolantan, Draragun, and Black Company.

They all created what they liked, faced various problems doing so, asserted their ideas, and sometimes went overboard with their work.

“Well... this place is the same as always,” I said to myself.

After my death penalty had expired, I’d logged in and found my clan completely unchanged.

I was standing in the large, 200,000 square meter facility located in Vandelheim’s outskirts. It was the headquarters of the Triangle of Wisdom and the center of the imperium’s cutting-edge technology.

This scene here... this mix of eccentrics, weirdos, and normal people playing with robots was the other face of the imperial capital.

Such sights weren’t uncommon in this city, but nothing could match the Triangle of Wisdom in terms of scale.

This was the clan *he* had created — a place where people could

gather, combine their intellects and *create what they wished, as they pleased.*

“Mh...” I silently looked at the scene and pondered.

Just like the city, people also had multiple faces. If the plot in Gideon was the dark side of his dream, then this was surely the bright side.

“All right, then...” I murmured.

I turned away from the everyday scene and walked towards a certain place in the headquarters: the structure’s central part.

It was the clan leader’s... Mr. Franklin’s... my sister’s room.



“I’m having you leave the clan,” she said right as I entered, without as much as a greeting, enjoying the comfort of her chair.

“So you’re firing me,” I said, not surprised in the least.

I was already prepared for this. After all, when she’d activated Plan C — the one she’d hidden from me — I’d gone and betrayed her. If I hadn’t deactivated La Porte de l’Enfer’s Freezing, her plan would’ve gone a bit better.

“Veldorbell said that he’s leaving the clan, too,” she added. “Well, he was a guest, so this isn’t unexpected.”

Her tone as she fired me and talked about Veldorbell was exactly the same as always — the one she used while roleplaying the mad scientist known as “Mr. Franklin.”

“He also left us with a nice parting gift of three soundtracks. A highly methodical guy, that one. It’s a shame to lose him, but... well... I can’t really argue with it.”

“You can’t?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “He only joined this clan to find ‘a true hero’ or whatever, but taking part in my plan made him miss out on quite a lot. I also think that he wasn’t too amused by what I did.”

She then closed her eyes, as though remembering something.

“I’m not the most popular person. He wasn’t the first to distance himself from me. Right before the war, AR-I-CA, the Ace, left me and went on to become one of Caldina’s Superiors. People are turning away from me left and right...”

She formed a wry grin and looked directly at me.

“Yu,” she said, changing her tone. She was talking to me as herself now. “Why did you come to help me? You were disgusted with me, weren’t you?”

“That’s not...”

“You felt betrayed, didn’t you?” she cut my words short, not letting me deny it.

“That’s...”

If I tried to answer that question with “That’s not true,” I would definitely be lying. She’d made a promise that she wouldn’t hurt tians, but had gone on to design a plot where that promise was broken.

“That’s why, before you leave, I want to know,” she continued. “Why did you come to help me on the Pandemonium?”

She wanted an answer. But...

“I... I don’t know that, either,” I muttered.

I looked inside me, but couldn’t find the answer, no matter what. After all, I’d acted before thinking it through, so no amount of thought could help me know that.

“I just don’t know...”

Before I’d realized it, tears were flowing down my face.

They were a belated reaction to the fact that I will now be separated from my sister in this world, too. The words “before you leave” reminded me of this.

I finally understood.

Even if she’d lied to me, betrayed me, and did things I thought were horrible... I still really loved my sister.

Since I couldn’t give my own answer and just continued crying, she went and formed her own conclusion. “You couldn’t think of what to do, so you acted without thinking and ended up doing what you did.”

She stood up from her chair and walked up to me.

“Next time, take the time to form a conclusion that you can hold with you to the bitter end,” she said as she took out a handkerchief and wiped my tears away.

“Ah,” I silently gasped as I realized that she was doing it with the exact same precision and care as she used to.

“Yu.” She looked into my eyes. “Travel and broaden your horizons. That’s what I did back on Earth.”

“Eh...?”

“Thankfully, the experiences in this world — especially those related to your disposition — don’t ever go to waste. There’s a lot for you to gain if you leave my side and travel around, so don’t bind yourself to me or the clan. Experience *Infinite Dendrogram* as you please. And if you wish to return once you’re done, I’ll always be ready to accept you.”

“Sis...”

“Oh, also.” She reached into her inventory and took something out. It was a Garage storing a Magingear. “This is both a parting gift... and a birthday present. You’re turning fifteen on Tuesday of next week, right?”

“You remember...?” I asked, making her form a wry grin.

“Don’t be silly. I could never forget your birthday.” Then that grin

became a smile.

It was unlike any expressions she'd displayed during the incident in Gideon. If anything, it was like one of the gentle smiles she'd given me long ago... when we still lived together.

"Francesca..." I spoke her real name as the tears she'd just wiped began flowing again.

I finally understood.

That devilish man was right — I'd always avoided looking at her bad side. It surely existed, and it made lots of people suffer, but it wasn't all that she was. Just like now, she could still be very gentle to me, and that was no delusion.

"Thank you, Francesca," I said. "Let's meet again someday."

"Of course, Yu." She nodded. "Until next time."

With that, I left the Triangle of Wisdom.

Once I walked out of the room, Cyco appeared out of my left hand.

"That's a nice expression, Hugo," she said.

"Mhm..."

"Good thing you got to be honest with your sister, right?"

"Cyco..."

Apparently, this sharp-tongued partner of mine had been watching me and my sister's conversation.

"Thanks, Cyc—"

"Still, I know you're girls on the inside and all, but you both look like adult men. And a scene where two adult men talk like women and have a teary farewell is a bit... you know..."

...Cyco, those words completely ruin it, I thought sourly.



Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin

Still in my own room, I looked at the monitors and watched Yu leave.

She was surrounded by a large number of my clan members. I'd just announced that she was going on a journey, so they were there to see her off.

Though sad about her leaving, they all encouraged her and wished her the best.

Yu had only been in the clan for about a month of real life time, but she was already quite popular among our members. She was gentle to a fault, and as far as I knew, she'd spent a lot of her time helping people out. She even remembered the names of a few hundred clan members, which might've been part of why she was liked.

And speaking of being liked... a group of girls was bawling. They were the clan's Yu fan club.

Which was fine and all, but... she was a girl on the inside. I was a woman, too, but strangely enough, people rarely noticed.

Were they anything like fans of the Takarazuka Revue?

It wasn't something I could relate to, to be honest.

"It's gonna get pretty lonely here," said one of the clan members surrounding her.

"Yeah... We're losing a skilled test pilot."

"I really wanted him to test the Supersonic Death Revolver Catapult."

Okay, what is that wonderfully-named device, and why don't I know about it?

"Oh no! We're losing a Master who's handsome both inside and out."

"They're much rarer than those who are only handsome on the outside."

"Only the beautiful die young..."

Yu's not dying, though.

"There goes the pilot with a Maiden..."

"They were so picturesque, too... especially for lewds..."

"Oh, speaking of which, I'll send you the new leader x Hugo thing when we're done."

All right, the fanfiction department is next in line to be eaten by my new monsters.

"The leader should've come and seen him off, too."

"Dude, do you even know who you're talking about? Guy's probably watching this through those cameras over there."

"Should we hack and kill the camera network?"

"...We're the ones who'll have to fix it, you know?"

I would very much prefer it if they didn't damage their own surveillance system. Still, they were completely right about me watching.

The goodbyes continued for a long while. During her month — three months in *Dendro* time — in the Triangle of Wisdom, Yu had become a true clan member.

"Hm..." I quietly pondered.

I was the one who'd invited her to the clan, or rather, *Infinite Dendrogram* as a whole. Honestly, I could've invited her much earlier, and it was somewhat strange that I hadn't.

After the imperium had gained superiority over the kingdom, after I'd killed the one who'd given me the death penalty, and after my Triangle of Wisdom had become more prosperous than ever, I'd suddenly had the idea to invite her over.

I didn't know whether I'd just had an urge to show her what I'd created, or whether I just hadn't had anything better to do, but that

was when I'd become determined to meet her again, after several years of separation.

And soon enough, she and I had met in this world.

In all honesty, I truly hadn't expected her to be like me and use an avatar of the opposite gender. That had made our rendezvous far more troublesome than expected.

Anyway, though a few years had passed since we'd seen each other, she was still a very good girl. Though she was roleplaying a pompous, theatrical knight/prince-like character, she was still as gentle as ever.

Her Embryo being a Maiden made it clear that she was also considerate of the tians calling this world their home, which was very much like her.

Yu was gentle, indeed.

However, it seemed like she'd misunderstood something.

"Well, it's more like that I made her misunderstand," I said.

She probably believed that I'd made her leave the clan and go on a journey purely for her sake. That was part of the reason, yes, but I'd also done it for myself.

Why? It was very simple.

"With her at my side... I'd be unable to do anything truly gruesome."

Plans C and D had failed. That meant that the next time I designed a plot or worked to extinguish those who'd defeated me, I'd have to do something far more fiendish.

If Yu was at my side, she'd put a mental brake on me.

In hindsight, I could've been far more relentless with my plot in Gideon. Though her presence had given me peace of mind, she'd been in the way of my march to victory.

And now, she was going away.

My dear sister — the person I wanted to appear gentle to, and the embodiment of my conscience — was no longer at my side.

I was now free to act without restraint.

I wouldn't have to cherry-pick my methods, and I'd be able to fight the ones who'd defeated me with all I had.

"Keep your head clean for me... Ray Starling," I said, as pure vitriol bubbled up my throat.

Epilogue C: Ray the Unbreakable

Duel city Gideon, first district, Paladin, Liliana Grandria

Bells were tolling.

Three mornings had dawned upon Gideon since that nightmarish night. Clear, yet sorrowful bells were echoing throughout the city, as all the churches in Gideon were sounding out a requiem.

It was a sound for the second day of the three day-long combined funeral happening here in the knight offices in the first district, mourning the knights and guards that had laid down their lives during the incident.

Our Royal Guard had lost 18, Gideon's knights had lost 15, and the guards had lost 28, making for a total of 61.

"...Sixty-one," I silently voiced the number.

The only saving grace was that the lives lost here had been relatively few compared to the crushing defeat and loss of life we'd suffered during the war. And most of all, by some miracle, the incident hadn't killed a single civilian. Though, sad as it was, I couldn't say that it was the result of the sacrifice of the deceased.

Not saying a word, I looked at the mourners.

A young boy standing before a coffin was calling out for his father.

A woman was on her knees, sobbing uncontrollably.

An old man looked at the flower altar, completely still, as though in shock.

Clearly, they were family of the knights and guards who'd never made it back.

I could tell because they were exactly the same as Milia and I had been when we'd attended the combined funeral for those lost in the war... including our father.

"...Hhaah," I breathed a sad sigh. As ones with a duty to protect the kingdom, knights and soldiers were all ready for death.

However, I doubted that any of them thought they'd die on that night.

Death could come suddenly and without warning.

Gideon's knights and guards had been killed by either the monsters that had attacked the streets, or by the lawless Masters the other Masters referred to as "player killers," while my subordinates had died in the battle against Franklin. Some had been crushed by

that tentacle monster, while others had been consumed by the overwhelmingly powerful dragon clad in the red aura.

All of us had been powerless against them.

But Ray and his brother — the King of Destruction, Shu Starling — and many other Masters had avenged those that were lost. They'd saved my subordinates and the kingdom's second princess, too, while also sending the tian-killing "player killers" to the gaol.

Thanks to their efforts, many of the deceased had been recompensed, and those that had died that night hadn't died in vain.

I was silent.

Both the one who'd started the incident and the ones who'd ended it were Masters.

They had only been able to stop Franklin because they were like him.

"Even so, Masters... those chosen by Embryos... aren't special," I whispered.

They were as human as the rest of us.

They simply had a means of escaping death and were blessed with immense powers.

Though they were quick to gain power, their powers weren't their identities.

That was why we had Masters who crushed others, such as the Hell General or Franklin, as well as those who stopped them, such as Ray and the King of Destruction. That was how it was among us tians, as well.

There was a vast difference in power between tians and Masters, but they were just as human as us.

That power difference was exactly why only Masters were capable of stopping a rampaging Master. That was what had happened that night... and what hadn't happened in the war half a year ago.

"Protecting the kingdom requires their aid... Lady Altimia," I muttered and pictured the person I served, the first princess and the acting ruler of the country, Altimia A. Altar.

Sadly, it was doubtful that Her Highness Altimia intended to borrow the powers of the Masters.



She didn't consider them to be as human as us.

"Still..."

I watched the flower altar and noticed that the left hands of those placing flowers there were varied.

Those with and without crests alike were mourning the deceased and adding bouquets to the altar.

One was gently patting a crying child's head, while another comforted a different child with a light embrace.

Another one supported a woman who was about to fall due to the staggering despair.

Another took the hand of an old man who stood still in shock, and helped him place his flowers on the altar.

"They really are just like us... Lady Altimia," I whispered.

Speaking of Masters, I wonder what he's doing, I thought.

Yesterday, he'd come here to present his flowers the moment the combined funeral was opened.

He'd just lost his left arm, so I could only hope that he wasn't doing anything reckless. With what he'd done during the trouble with Milia, the Gouz-Maise Gang, and Franklin's Game, it was clear that he wouldn't hesitate to do absurd things for the sake of others.

"But that quality might just be a part of his kindly nature," I said to myself and pondered about similar nothings when suddenly, Lord Lindos ran up to me with a panicked expression.

"Lady Grandria! We have trouble!" he exclaimed.

"Oh? What's the matter?"

"Her Highness Elizabeth, she..."

"She has no official business today, yes? Today is a free day for her."

She'd spent all of yesterday attending the combined funeral, and had spent all her days prior to the Clash dedicated to the relevant preparations. Because of that and due to her kidnapping by Franklin, she'd been given a day off today so that she could have a proper rest.

"Did Her Highness say anything?" I asked. "If she wishes to leave, simply have a number of Royal Guard accompany her, and—"

"She left a note and escaped the Count's residence! Again!"

"...Augh." I voiced a strange sound as I turned dizzy.



Duel city Gideon, sixth district's arena, Paladin, Ray Starling

When using Nemesis in her greatsword or halberd forms, I never felt a hint of her weight. Both of those forms could be classified as ultra-heavy weaponry, but I could swing them with ease thanks to that trait.

I was always thankful for it, but never was my gratitude as great as it was now that I'd lost my left arm.

I tried swinging the greatsword, then had her switch to the halberd and did the same.

Though I couldn't spin the flag halberd due to risk of dropping her, I could still thrust, slash, and cleave without much trouble.

"Looks like I can get by without my left arm," I said.

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed. "The lack of an arm is nothing to us."

Well, I wouldn't go that far. Losing an arm was a pretty big deal. However, she was right that it wasn't much of a problem when fighting with her as my weapon.

A very clear problem, however, was Gardranda.

Without my left arm, I couldn't equip the left bracer, meaning that I couldn't use Purgatorial Flames, which was one of my main skills. When punching Franklin, I seemed to have discovered a new way to use it, too, but now it looked like that would have to wait.

I'd thought that losing my left arm would render me incapable of storing Nemesis, but there was no problem at that front. The crest had simply moved to the upper left arm — the part that was still there.

Clearly, losing an arm wasn't enough to lose the sign that I was a Master.

"Still, holding you with one arm will make it pretty hard to fight while riding Silver," I said.

I mean, I can't really hold Silver's reins with my teeth.

"Mhm," Nemesis agreed. "But I believe it's a good thing here."

"Because... why?"

"We're about to battle her again, and I want us to face her like last time — with just the two of us."

"Oh my, aren't you enthusiastic," the "her" she was referring to, Marie, said jokingly.

Just like during our encounter in Noz Forest, she was shrouded in the same black mist and held her gun-like Embryo, Arc-en-Ciel, in her right hand. She and I were in this arena to have the rematch duel we'd promised to have when fighting Franklin's monster army.

We were facing one another in a block shielded by an impermeable barrier.

Besides us, the barrier contained a few spectators — Rook, Babi, Shu, Figaro, and one more person.

On an unrelated note, Rook had already known that Marie was the Superior Killer. Hell, Shu had known it, as well.

In hindsight, Shu... the King of Destruction... had tried to kill the Superior Killer even if it took burning down the entire Noz Forest, so him knowing her identity wasn't all that surprising.

Speaking of that incident, apparently he'd done it to avenge me.

I had lots of things to say about that, including but not limited to, “Dude, what the hell,” “No one asked for this,” and “You scorched a goddamn forest,” but I chose to tell him off later.

After all, we were accompanied by someone far more troublesome than Shu.

“Marie, do your very best!”

For reasons unknown, the princess that we’d all worked so hard to save was among the spectators.

“...Might I finally know why you’re here, princess?” I asked.

“Hm? Very well,” she said.

Apparently, she had awoken right before my battle at the top of Pandemonium. Because of this, she clearly recalled how I’d faced Franklin and how Marie had rescued her.

Wanting to thank us, she’d snuck out of the count’s residence *again* and walked around searching for us.

During her search, she’d found Shu and Figaro, both of whom were in suits that really stood out from the crowd. Thinking that she could find me by following my brother, she’d done exactly that and eventually came here.

Apparently, she had the whole day off, but that wasn’t the problem here...

“Liliana!” I shouted, unable to hold it in. “You really need to do something about your security!”

“That’s more or less how I feel. ‘What? Again?’ and all that,” said Marie. “Still, rather than poor security, I’m starting to think that it’s Ellie who’s just really good at sneaking out. It’s the second time she’d done this, after all.”

“The princess might have a talent for it,” added Rook. “She might make a good thief.”

A princess who’s a thief...? What?

“Anyway,” said Marie. “Ellie’s watching, so victory’s as good as mine! Don’t expect any consideration or mercy!”

“Well, I wouldn’t have it any other way, but...”

This is nothing like the revenge match I’d imagined, I thought.

After Marie had given me my first death penalty, I’d pictured a desperate rematch between two enemies. But now, right as we were about to fight, we were surrounded by a peaceful air of friendship.

“...And that’s fine, really,” I said.

“Indeed,” Nemesis agreed.

Though Marie had once killed us, she was now nothing but a friend, and that was in no way a bad thing.

“Still, I want my rematch,” I continued.

“Heh heh,” Marie chuckled. “Such vigor and drive... But do you really think you can win?”

Well, that's the question...

"Let's see... you're way above me in both level and stats," I said.

Her total level was over the cap for low and high-rank jobs, while her AGI was at least several dozens of times greater than mine.

"My technique is just incomparable to yours."

She'd been fighting in *Infinite Dendrogram* for far longer than me. Her experience was on a whole different plane.

"And I'm here without my left arm — quite a handicap. It's pretty clear that I have nearly no chance of winning."

This battle would've been hard even if I was in top shape, so this definitely didn't help my chances.

"Still... I won't say that I can't win."

No matter how severe the situation, I would never quit without even trying.

"If there's a possibility I want, I'll never give up reaching for it."

That was what my brother had taught me.

"That's what seizing the possibility is all about."

My words made Shu laugh out loud and give me a thumbs-up.

"And that's why I'm in it to win it," I concluded my speech.

"And also why you're Ray the 'Unbreakable.'"

"Unbre... Huh?" *What?*

"Oh? You're unaware?" she said. "That's your nickname."

"I have a nickname?"

"Indeed you do. 'The King of Destruction's little brother, the one who didn't break before a Superior.'"

"Well, that sure is something..."

What an awkward nickname to have, I thought.

"There's also 'Dark Paladin,' 'Prince on the Silver Steed,' and 'The Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson.' Any preferences?"

"Unbreakable, please."

It's not even a damn choice with those other options.

"I'm quite fond 'Prince,' though," Nemesis commented.

"...No, thank you."

Anyway, "Unbreakable," eh...? I actually kinda like it.

"Okay then," said Marie. "Here I go, Unbreakable!"

"Yeah! Bring it on, Superior Killer!"

We prepared for battle.

Marie instantly pulled Arc-en-Ciel's trigger, making it fire bullets as numerous as they were during the first time she'd killed me. It was a repeat of that day.

Time for a quest, then, I thought.

My target was the strongest PK, the Superior Killer.

My destination was beyond the familiar veil of bullets.

And my goal... was victory.

“Let the quest...”

“...begin!” Nemesis finished for me.

I kicked the ground beneath me and dashed forward.

To be continued in the next episode...

Midword



Cat: “Greetings, dear readers, I’m the Cat you all know well by now, Cheshiiire.”

Xun: “I’m Xun, for XunYu.”

Bear: “And I’m the one and only Bear... the King of Destruction, Shu Starling!”

Cat: “We knew, and so did the sharper readers. Maybe even since volume 1.”

Bear: “You’re cold! I’ve been prebearing for this for five volumes!”

Cat: “That aside, this concludes the Franklin arc and ends the first part of *Infinite Dendrogram* as a whole.”

Bear: “What a good finale.”

Cat: “Hey! The part is done, but the product is still going on! Don’t jinx it!”

Xun: “But the last scene was somewhat like the last chapter of a manga. Honestly, it would work pretty well if it just ended here.”

Cat: “Stop! Nothing’s ending! We’re still going on!”

Bear: “Anyway, jokes aside, the beary presence of a midword means that there’s something more, right?”

Cat: “Yes. There will now be two everyday life stories set after the

Franklin arc.”

Bear/Xun: “...”

Cat: “You two look like you want to say something.”

Bear: “Who puts everyday life stories after final scenes like the one we just had?”

Xun: “...Wouldn’t tHE volume leave a bettEr impression if it ended hErE?”

Cat: “Silence. Anyway, the latter of the two stories is completely new.”

Bear: “...Did the author need to fill some pages?”

Cat: “He tried to write something new into the main story, but he couldn’t think of anything besides expanding on The Earth and the DOA worm.”

Xun: “Hey, don’t cAll it DOA. I had to be reallY careful with the bomb whEN killing that thiNg.”

Bear: “He could’ve expanded on me and my ursine greatness.”

Cat: “You’re saying you want *more* scenes?! I want some, too, you know?! I didn’t show up in volumes 4, 5, and won’t show up in the story that comes next, either! When’s my turn?!”

Xun: *This has been bOthering me for a while... Why is Cheshire so nAive when it comes to appEArance in the story?*

Bear: “Anyway, enough of the sad cat without any scenes. Please enjoy the stories that come next. Thank you beary much.”

Cat: “Give me a turn!”

Extra: A Change of Clothing

Paladin, Ray Starling

Ten days had passed in *Dendro* since the incident started by a certain bastard in a lab coat.

Rook, Marie, and I were still staying here in Gideon, busy either sparring or fulfilling guild quests.

The need for repairs in the city had created a demand for building materials, and Shu's obliterating Jeand Grasslands had turned it into a habitat for strong monsters which needed to be culled. Such quests were so MMO-like that they reminded me that *Dendro* was, indeed, a VRMMO.

As for the sparring... though I rarely came out as the victor, I'd learned quite a lot.

My opponents had included Marie, Shu, Xunyu, Figaro, and even the other local duel rankers. Though they'd allowed me to use consumable warding accessories, my victories had still been few and far between, which was a clear testament to just how strong they were.

Thankfully, all our duels had taken place within the arena barriers, so all the items used and accessories lost had come back to us once the battle was done. With the Lifesaving Brooch and the other stuff I'd used having a combined cost of about 10,000,000 lir, I'd never appreciated the restorative functions of the arenas as much as I did now.

10,000,000 lir — in other words, ten times more than we'd received for killing Gardranda. It was a great fortune no matter how you looked at it, and it was in no way an amount I could have used when I'd started out. But the current state of my finances allowed me this luxury. After all, I'd recently had two great bursts of income.

First, there was the money I'd won by betting the reward for the Gouz-Maise Gang on Figaro. The 60,000,000 I'd put in had been multiplied by 1.2, giving me 72,000,000. Cleaning up after the mess made by a certain bastard in a lab coat had made the reward come a few days late, but it had come nonetheless.

Then there was the reward from Count Gideon.

He'd presented great amounts of money to all the Masters that'd fought in Franklin's game. The newbies who'd escaped the central arena and those who'd already been outside had received especially

large portions.

Sadly, Marie hadn't been among the recipients, since only our inner circle knew that she was the Superior Killer, but she'd made her share of the Count's money by doing other work for him.

Naturally, Shu was rewarded with the greatest sum of us all.

"With this and the drops from the Suicide Series, I made back enough for a tenth of the ammo I used," he told me.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the total cost.

That aside, the subject of our rewards wouldn't be complete without the story of how Rook used his, and my involvement in it.

It had happened two days ago...



As I sat around, thinking of what to do with the copious amount of money I'd received from Count Gideon and through betting, Rook walked up to me.

"Ray, can I ask for your help with something?" Rook asked.

"Hm?" I said. "Well, this is unusual. It's rare for you to ask for something."

"Perhaps," he admitted. "But this is something I just can't do by myself. It's related to my job change..."

For a while now, Rook had wanted to switch to being a Lost Heart — the pimp grouping's high-rank job. It had three conditions: having reached level 50 as a Pimp, the sum total stats of all underlings being above a certain point, and at least 1,000,000 lir earned through Pimp work.

Rook had already cleared the first two, but the third one was proving to be an issue. He probably could've gotten the money when he'd done the modeling quest, but he'd chosen Marilyn and her carriage instead of a monetary reward, so it didn't count for the condition.

Because of his inability to move on to Lost Heart, after he'd maxed out Pimp during Franklin's Game, he'd switched to Tamer and leveled up his Monster Strengthening skill.

And I guess he's now found a way to solve the problem, I thought.

"You have an idea for how to switch to Lost Heart?" I asked.

"Yes." He nodded as he reached into his inventory and took out a coin pouch. "Could you give me a job and use this money as my reward?"

"...Ohh, I get it," I said.

Earning 1,000,000 lir through honest Pimp work would likely take lots of time and effort. But if you prepared the necessary money and had a third party give you the job, you'd clear the condition as if it were no big deal.

I'm guessing this option became available thanks to Gideon's reward, I thought.

"This bag has 1,000,000 lir for my reward and 1,000,000 lir for the Pimp guild's charges — a total of 2,000,000 lir. Use it to give me a job," Rook said.

"Yeah, sur— Wait, the Pimp guild takes half the money?!"

Holy shit, what a kickback!

"I can't really fault them," said Rook. "The Pimp guild must pay lots of taxes to continue being an official guild. There are some Pimps who don't like that and do pimping on their own... but that's a crime here in the kingdom."

...So the Pimp job is a gray zone in and of itself, I thought.

Apparently, the merchant grouping's Slave Dealers were handled in a similar manner — work through a highly-taxed guild was legal, while freelance slave dealing wasn't. The kingdom was somewhat... no, *very* strict about this.

Anyway, I took the money, went to the Pimp guild, and gave Rook a job.

It didn't matter what I requested, but I'd remembered seeing an elephant stand on a ball while watching the morning news, so I'd nonchalantly written down that I wanted to see Marilyn do the same.

It went without saying that I'd come to deeply regret not giving them an easier task.

They had taken quite some time just finding a ball large enough for a triceratops-sized creature to stand on, and then they had to spend an entire day and night training her to be able to do it. Naturally, I was really sorry about all this.

Still, her success had made her fulfill the request, and Rook had cleared the condition, letting him become a Lost Heart.

Also, a short while after my request, a rumor had spread throughout the city that "some rich weirdo paid 1,000,000 lir to a guy just to see a monster step on a ball," creating a sort-of "ball-stepping boom" among Gideon's Pimps and Tamers.



Now, back to my circumstances.

The money I'd won in the bet and the Count's reward had given me some leeway in spending, allowing me to buy lots of various equipment. I'd started by giving Shu the accessories I'd broken during my first quest, and then bought myself a Lifesaving Brooch and other items, among which was a simple prosthetic arm.

It could be best described as a hook that a generic pirate would wear. It didn't connect to my nerves or anything, and it was much like a long glove that I wore on what remained of my lost arm. I could use

MP to make the hook tighten, but I couldn't fine-tune it, and the lack of fingers made it impossible to use as a normal hand.

Some would question the tightening function's usefulness, but the answer to that was simple: holding a horse's reins. According to Alejandro, the man who'd sold it to me, these prosthetic arms had been developed for knights and nobles who'd lost their arms, but who still wanted to ride their horses. As the proud owner of Silver, I greatly appreciated that function's existence.

There was the problem in that it limited my left side to only being able to hold the reins, making it a blind spot in horseback battles. And its shape didn't allow me to equip the left Miasmaflame Bracer, either. But there was no use in minding that right now.

Apparently, Legendaria and Huang He had high-quality magic prosthetics, while Dryfe was highly advanced in the mechanical side of the spectrum. However, all such prosthetics were custom-made specifically for the customers, so you couldn't find them anywhere on the market, which went doubly so here in the kingdom. I couldn't waste time trying to get what wasn't available here, so this prosthetic arm was more than enough, especially since I'd likely find a way to heal my arm sooner or later.

Still, I couldn't help but note that those surrounding me — mainly Nemesis — looked at me as if they had something to say.

Well, the hook's pretty pirate-like. It probably stands out, I thought.

Anyway, with the leeway in my finances, I could allow myself to roll the gacha in Alejandro's shop. Specifically, one 100,000 lir roll per day. Honestly, I had the money for it and was up for more rolls, but Nemesis just wouldn't have it.

"That's all I will allow. Roll any more, and I'll eat food that costs as much money as you spend," she'd said, making me back down immediately. With how spacious her stomach was now, that threat sounded all too real.

That aside, the gacha had yet to give me any capsules above C rank. Unsurprisingly, Bs and above were considerably rarer than the ones below, meaning that Rook and I had been very lucky to land an X and an S on the same day. Still, I felt that it was high time the gacha blessed me with a B or an A.

With that thought in mind, I came to Alejandro's place, did my shopping, and stood before the gacha to make my daily roll.

"...Let me ask you something, Ray," said Nemesis. "The fortune in your hands allows you to buy most of the things you require, no? What compels you to roll the gacha?"

"It's the unknown," I replied.

"...I'd prefer it if you didn't try to make it sound so cool."

Was it wrong to find something attractive simply because you

didn't know what it will give you?

Anyway, it was my turn, so I threw in today's 100,000 lir and made my roll, which gave me...

"...An 'A'?"

The capsule was marked with a letter denoting the second highest level of rarity — not quite a jackpot, but close enough. However, my excitement was drowned out by my confusion at the capsule.

The S one that Rook had received had looked like a rainbow-colored mineral, while, aside from the obvious rarity, the X capsule I'd gotten Silver from had looked perfectly normal. But I definitely couldn't say the same for the capsule now in my hands.

It was black in color, the "A" on it was blood-red, and, for reasons unknown, the letter was written in a "melted" font. Not only that, but the capsule's surface was covered in lines much like blood vessels. To top it all off, it had letters on it saying, "WARNING: Please don't open when children are nearby."

...*What the hell?* was just about all I could think about it.

"What you hold in hand is a wealth coffer of hex and malediction," said a voice coming from my side.

I looked away from the capsule and towards the source, where I saw a girl wearing gothic-looking dress armor.

"Oh, Juliet," I said. She was an acquaintance of mine.

Juliet the Black Raven was one of Figaro's fellow duelists, and the fourth in the kingdom's duel rankings. She was one of the two Masters who had fought in the semi event before the Clash of the Superiors. I had come to know her through Figaro and sparred with her several times now.

Despite appearances, she was very easy to get along with, and since she was younger than me IRL, I could talk to her with no reservations to speak of.

"Heh heh heh," she chuckled in a curious manner. "We haven't been in one another's presence since our last immortal battle two nights ago, Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson."

Sure, she talks a bit strangely and uses one of my weird nicknames, but she's an okay person, anyway.

"Oh, yeah, I haven't seen you since our sparring match two days ago," I said. "So, do you know something about this capsule?"

"Verily. The coffer seals a maledicted artifact soaked in blood and tainted by grudge. The mark of rarity speaks volumes about the treasure's power, but alas, that power might prove to be a double-edged blade that gnaws at the wielder's heart."

Mhm...

Basically, she was saying that "There's a cursed item inside. The A

means that it's something good, but it also means that the curse is powerful, as well."

"Mh..." Nemesis looked at me in silence.

"When balance thrives, the one to suffer the malediction will be the wielder alone," Juliet added. "But when the stars of ill omen shine bright in the heavens, the calamity will fall upon those envining them, as well. Never banish this memory to oblivion, lest you bring about a new tragedy."

I see.

She was saying that "Normally, the curse only affects the one equipping the item, but it might sometimes extend to the people around you, so be careful."

"Mhh..." Nemesis continued quietly looking at me.

"All right," I said. "Then I guess I'll go open this somewhere with no people around. Thanks for the warning."

"Heh heh heh," Juliet chuckled. "My advice needs no gratitude. But if you so desire, O Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson, we may partake in yet another immortal battle."

"Sure, let's spar again sometime."

With that, Juliet and I parted ways.

All right, so I'll go open this where there aren't people around, and...

"...Might I ask you something?" Nemesis said with an indefinable expression on her face, finally breaking her silence.

"What is it?" I asked.

"How can you talk to her so smoothly?"

"What? Juliet? Sure, her gear is a bit scary, but she's a good, approachable girl."

"That's not what I... Oh, never mind. If you don't get it, I won't push it."

...What's with her? I wondered.

Anyway, we moved to the usual place: Nex Plains. Ever since I'd gotten Gardranda, this seemed to have become my go-to testing area for new items.

Upon confirming that there were no people within 100 meters of me, I opened the cursed capsule.

Inside, I found upper body armor called "CBR Armor," where "CBR" stood for "Cursed Bloody Regeneration."

It was a piece of light armor that was blood-red in color and generally looked *very* sinister.

It gave +200 to defense, making it even tougher than Gardranda — the hardest piece of equipment in my arsenal.

Additionally, it came with a level 3 skill called "Bloody Regeneration," which restored three HP per second. That didn't seem like much, but it was completely passive and didn't use a bit of my MP

or SP.

Though not as unbalanced and broken as a special reward, CBR Armor was definitely a decent piece of equipment. However, it was called “Cursed” for a reason.

The item said:

CBR Armor

Armor mass-produced by a wicked alchemist.

Provides the user with regenerative abilities born of the grudge seeped into the steel through the blood of the victims.

This unstable source of power afflicts the wearer with various curses.

Curses: Bleeding, Doom, Weakness.

I was all too familiar with the effects of the debuffs named.

“Well, this thing sure doesn’t have a pleasant background,” I said. “And wearing it makes you bleed out, renders you immobile, and cuts your stats by half... Basically, this is just a damn blood bag generator.”

I can’t use this at all, I thought. The decent positives don’t make up for the insane negatives. What the hell was the guy thinking when mass-producing these?

Not only that, but it had a total level requirement of only 50, most likely to make it equipable so that it could curse as many people as possible, and if that wasn’t kindness nobody wanted, I didn’t know what was.

What do I even do with this...? Can I sell it...? I don’t think I’m getting my 100,000 lir back, though.

“A Dark Knight could probably wear it without a problem,” I said. Jobs from the dark knight grouping, like Juliet’s Fallen Knight, had a skill that weakened the negative effects of cursed items.

Because of that, this armor would’ve been good for a Dark Knight, but I happen to be a Paladin.

“Eh?” Nemesis released a confused-sounding voice.

“Eh?” I responded the same way, confused by her confusion.

“...Oh, right,” she said. “You *are* a Paladin.”

“You shouldn’t forget your partner’s job,” I said.

“Well, your battle style and clothing are a far cry from ‘Paladin-like...’ And to think you used to shine so bright.” She put her hand over her mouth, so I couldn’t make out much of what she was muttering.

But man, whoever thought that an armor that gives you Bleeding and Weakness was a good idea... Hm?

“Isn’t that one fewer curse than before?” I asked.

I still had the armor’s description window open, and it felt like the text there had changed a bit.

The three debuffs became two, didn’t th—? Oh, it dropped again.

Now it was just Bleeding, but soon enough, that one disappeared,

as well. Not only that, but the skill level on Bloody Regeneration had dropped from 3 to 1.

It now said:

BR Armor

Armor mass-produced by a wicked alchemist.

Provides the user with regenerative abilities born of the grudge seeped into the steel through the blood of the victims.

It used to afflict the wearer with various curses, but they vanished when the grudge was dispersed. This weakened the armor's regenerative abilities.

Even its name and background were different.

"...Why?" I asked.

"How curious," said Nemesis.

Why had the grudge just gone and "dispersed"? Had it gotten *sucked out* or something?

"Ah," Nemesis and I simultaneously exclaimed and looked at my feet... towards my Grudge-soaked Greaves — an item that could *absorb and store the surrounding grudge*.

Unlike Gardranda, who I'd talked to while out cold, it didn't appear to have any remnants of consciousness, but I couldn't help but feel that it *felt* satisfied and well-fed.

Apparently, it had absorbed the grudge from the CBR Armor.

"...I had no idea you could be used like this," I said.

The curses had been caused by the grudge, and with it gone, they'd vanished, as well. As a result, the unusable CBR Armor had become the usable — if slightly weakened — BR Armor. It was definitely better than the armor I was wearing just to fill the slot, so I didn't hesitate to put it on.

"Hey, it looks spiky, but it's actually pretty easy to move in," I said.

I quickly took a liking to it. With the good defense value and Bloody Regeneration, I had no reason not to use it.

"Mh..." Nemesis looked directly at me, clearly wanting to say something.

"What?"

"...Nothing. You've made your choice, and I won't say anything against it."

"Hm?"

Nemesis wasn't as articulate as usual today.

"Is something troubling you?" I asked.

"I'd be lying if I said 'no,' but it's not something I can tell you," she replied.

I could only assume that it was some girl thing, so I had no business pushing her any further.

"Fine by me," I said. "Let's get something to eat."

“...Very well.”

And so, elated thanks to my new gear, Nemesis and I returned back to Gideon.



Dryfe Imperium, Triangle of Wisdom headquarters

That day, a certain man in a lab coat — namely, the Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin — was checking the footage filmed by the spy monsters he'd sent to Gideon's surroundings.

He'd been gathering information this way for a while now, but things had changed recently.

Following Franklin's Game, Gideon had become filled with skilled counterespionage personnel, making it impossible for Franklin's spy monsters to enter the city. Because of this, nowadays, he was only sending monsters to the city's surroundings.

Of course, Franklin had no intention of executing any more plots in Gideon, but the city was the main haunt of the one he considered to be his archenemy, and he wanted to observe him to the best of his ability. This loathsome person happened to appear on one of his monster's footages as Franklin was casually eyeing them.

In the Nex Plains, he opened a capsule he'd gotten from a gacha machine, received a cursed piece of armor, spent some time thinking about something, then equipped it and returned to Gideon.

Upon seeing that, Franklin began to ponder.

“That appearance...”

A demonic bracer on his right hand.

A gnarled hook instead of his left.

A pair of boots fashioned from the dead.

Clad in armor rife with curses.

“...He honestly looks more like a Hell General than our actual Hell General.”

Ray's fashion sense was staggeringly heinous, but the boy was completely oblivious to it.

Franklin was aware that someone who constantly wore a lab coat wasn't all that much better, but even he felt like there was a thing or two to say about Ray's appearance.

“Did no one tell him about this?” Franklin mumbled as he looked at the archenemy in his monitor with a hint of pity in his eyes.

Franklin's question was nothing but reasonable, and the answer to it was, “No. No one told him.”

Ray was surrounded by people such as Shu, who was always in an animal costume; Rook, a guy in a Slime coat; Marie, who wore a suit despite being in a fantasy world; Figaro, who only cared about stats and wore a mishmash of gear because of it; Xunyu, who had

prosthetic arms and legs far too long for anyone; and Juliet, who wore a highly-adolescent set of gothic dress armor.

Other Masters weren't all that different, so tians tended to simply ignore it, thinking something like, "Well, he's a Master, so..."

There was no one who could tell Ray about the state of his fashion, as anyone wanting to do so would be rendered incapable of doing so when they simply looked at themselves.

And so, spurred by their silence, Ray's fashion took a turn toward the dark side.

Extra: Reiji's Everyday Life / Ray and Nemesis's Everyday Life

March 29th, 2045, Reiji Mukudori

About two weeks had passed since I'd started playing *Infinite Dendrogram*.

I'd spent a lot of this time in the game, and thanks to its tripled time feature, those two weeks had felt way longer than usual. Then again, all the stuff I'd experienced so far would make even a whole six weeks seem short.

I'd rescued Milianne during Liliana's quest, encountered Marie in Noz Forest, met Figaro in Tomb Labyrinth, fought against Gardrandia, met Hugo, rescued the children with him, struggled against Gouz-Maise, and defeated Franklin, ending his plot to break the kingdom's spirit.

All those events had happened during a span of just four real-life days, and I couldn't help but wonder how I'd ended up with such an event-heavy start in that world.

The days that came after were relatively peaceful. I did quests with my party, sparred against Figaro and his fellow duel rankers, tested Shu's cooking, and raided the Tomb Labyrinth with the three girls we'd met during Franklin's Game — all of which made for a pretty standard MMO experience.

According to Nemesis, "This is merely the calm before the storm. I'm certain that you will soon be involved in even greater trouble," and I could only hope that she was wrong.

Still, I couldn't deny that I had a tendency to get caught up in all sorts of incidents.

There was the car accident Shu had saved me from. Then there was the trip abroad that my sister had dragged me into, during which I'd gone through things that'd made me question whether it was actually real or I'd just dreamed it all.

Oh... just remembering that made my body tremble, so yeah, it had been very real.

That aside, there was something I had to do regardless of whether my new adventures in *Dendro* would be normal or not.

I had to go through college enrollment preparations.

Starting next month, I would be a college student. I'd spent half of the month remaining before college diving into *Dendro* so much that

I'd rarely had time to go outside. In fact, I'd been online longer than I'd been off, and it wouldn't have been surprising for me to forget the important things in my life.

Still, I wasn't negligent enough to miss the days during which I had the necessary college-related procedures, and I'd already gone for the briefing, the cooperative, the textbook selling, the physical examination, and so on.

Today was the final such day — the one in which I'd settle everything related to the humanities course I was going to take.

Being fresh out of high school, I couldn't help but wonder whether this process really had to be so complex and split into so many parts, but this might've been normal here in college.

Well, it wasn't like my apartment was all that far from the place. I could get there in less than half an hour on bike, so I had no trouble being on time and going through whatever I had to do.

I'll be back by evening and log in to Dendro then, I thought as I walked towards the apartment building's elevator.

On my way, I passed a fellow resident.

"Hello," I greeted her.

"Ah, hello," she reciprocated with her slightly awkward Japanese. She was a foreigner living on the same floor as me.

This apartment building was luxurious and secure, even by the city's standards, so it had no shortage of female tenants.

However, the high rent was a huge barrier preventing the common college student from living here, meaning that most of the collegians in this place were the children of particularly wealthy people. I was an exception to that, since I lived here thanks to Shu.

"Wait, that woman..." I muttered to myself.

The one I'd just passed was probably only a few years older than me.

Her lack of mastery over Japanese made it safe to guess she was a transfer student in some college. Even Shu had told me that there were lots of rich foreigners in this building. Since she was able to live here, she was probably a member of an upper class family.

No use thinking about a stranger's private life, I thought.

"But... what was her name, again?" I murmured.

When I'd moved in, I'd followed the cultural practice and greeted the neighbors on my floor with some soba. We'd introduced ourselves back then, and the fact that I couldn't remember her name bothered me so much, I stopped to think about it.

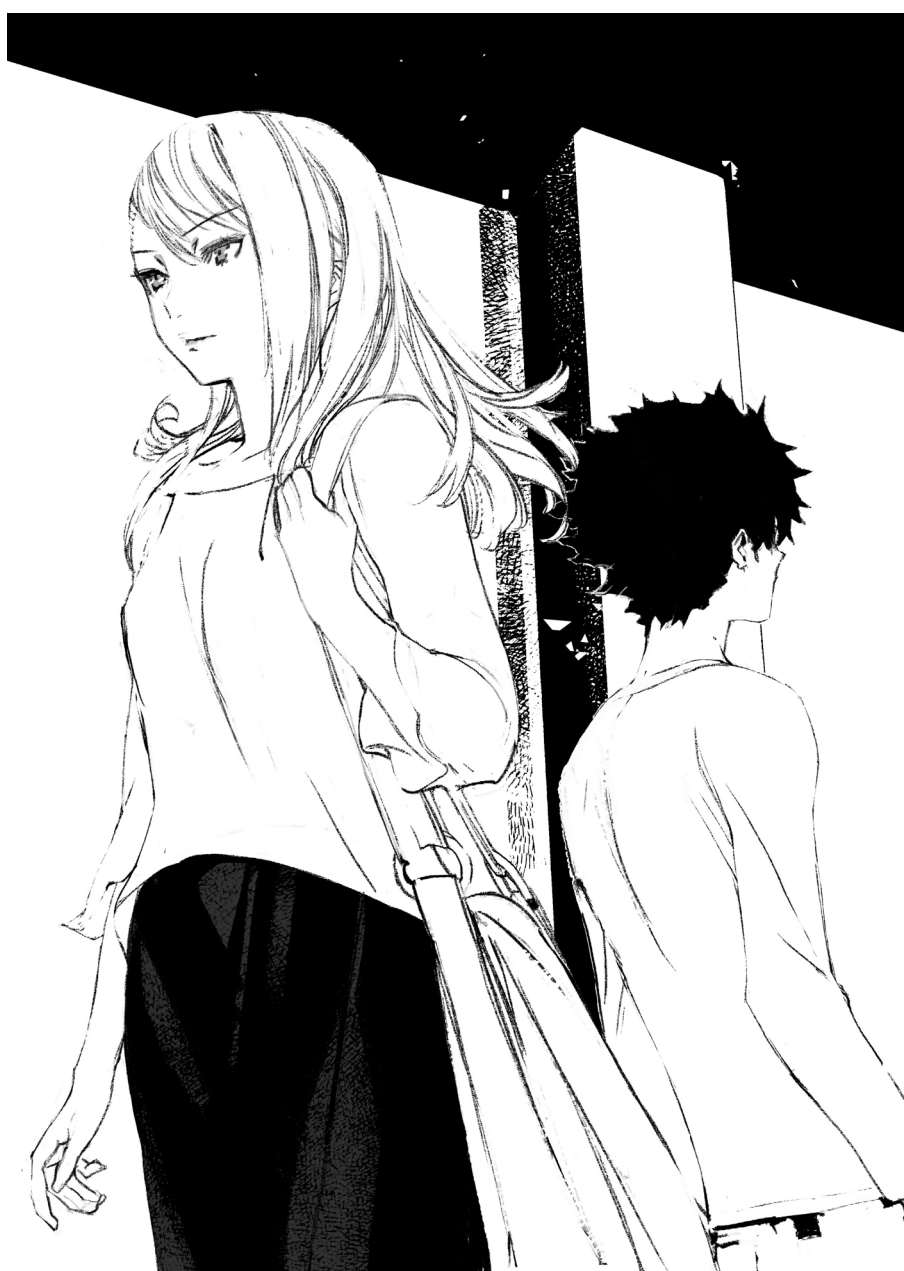
"It went something like Fra... Fra... Franklin? No, no, no, no."

Hearing "Fra" instantly made me picture that mad scientist lab coat bastard, but that was just wrong in all possible ways. Confusing that guy with that pretty blonde lady would be nothing if not rude.

Her actual name was...

“Oh, right,” I said as it came back to me. “It’s Francesca.”

Refreshed from having this weight on my mind lifted, I left the apartment building and went to college.





During my high school years, I'd always thought that all educational facilities were nearly empty during spring break, but a few visits to campus had quickly changed that.

There were lots of people here, even though it was late March. Some went to seminars, some paid visits to labs, while others were busy with club activities. The most passionate people were the ones ready and waiting to invite new members into their clubs.

"Clubs, eh...?" I mumbled to myself.

I was about to become a proper college student, so it might be a good idea for me to join one, too.

To my eye, the people promoting the sports-oriented clubs were the most enthusiastic of all. The mixed martial arts club, for one, was full of men with physiques larger than Shu's, showing off their muscles as they gave warm, or perhaps heated, invitations to the freshmen.

They also had a banner saying "Aim High! Leave a Mark in the Unlimited Pankration College Tournament!" — their goal, most certainly.

The Un-kra mention intrigued me, mostly due to the memories of Shu from when he'd still been in school.

However, unlike my superhuman brother or my downright inhuman sister, I was completely ordinary. Hell, I hadn't even been all that much into sports during my high school years, so I really had no business in that club.

"Ah, my high school years..." I muttered and went on a trip down memory lane.

Though I hadn't been in any clubs during my second and third years, I had been an active member of a club when I was a freshman. It'd been called the "Electronic Game Research Society" or just "EGRS," and its activities had begun and ended with only one thing: playing video games.

The school must've been pretty lenient to allow something like that, but then again, we had also been active in various e-sports, going as far as to participate in several national tournaments.

The club president had won first place in a *Verseair* (card game) event, while the vice president had been the last survivor in a major *War Grounds* (FPS) battle royale. I, too, had left my mark in a *Stream Fighter* (fighting game) tournament, so we'd ended up with three trophies in our club room.

The president and vice president had graduated soon afterward, but I recalled them having been pretty satisfied with the good

memories they'd made.

I wonder what they're doing right now, I thought as I pictured them — the ones who had become college students two years before me. *They send me New Year's cards, but those didn't say much about what they're doing. Knowing them, they're probably still gaming.*

"I could try joining a game-related club like I did in high school, but... Oh, whatever, I'll think this through once I actually start college," I decided.

I'm too busy with Dendro right now, anyway.

Suddenly, I imagined a college life spent doing nothing but playing online games. I quickly shelved the picture to the depths of my mind and resolved to do my best with both my higher education and my job hunting two or three years later.



I was done with my student card creation and all the other college-related business before the clock hit noon. In fact, all I really had to do was present my fingerprint.

The simplicity had me bewildered, but apparently, this was normal these days.

According to an aged worker, "Things have gotten increasingly more computerized over the thirty years I've been working here. Even this procedure has become *this* simple."

The schools in the area I'd lived in were pretty advanced, too, but nothing there was this speedy, which went to show that metropolitan higher education facilities were always ahead.

Honestly, if it was this easy, I couldn't help but wonder why it wasn't done along with the briefing.

Anyway, though that was over with unexpectedly quickly, it was now past 11 o'clock — a bit early, but still a good time to have lunch. With that in mind, I made my way towards the cafeteria, hoping that the food I'd be eating here over the next four years would actually be good.

"Wow... There are multiple cafeterias here," I said as I entered one of them, surprised by how different it was from high school.

I looked at the menu and noticed that it had multiple daily special meals and a great variety of noodles. While eyeing the intriguing, yet highly unappetizing, "Miso-Cooked Lobster Special," I ordered spaghetti with meat sauce — a favorite of mine.

"Hm..." I tasted some of it and concluded that it was normal. No, as far as school food went, it was definitely delicious. Still, I couldn't help but compare it with something else.

"The taste is... kinda dull."

It lacked a certain something I'd grown accustomed to.

Now that I think about it, I haven't cooked much recently, I realized.

I used to help around the house a lot, so I was familiar with basic chores and cooking. Enough for my mom to be certain I wouldn't have any trouble living by myself. As things were, however, I was barely doing any cooking for myself, and was instead opting to eat basic onigiri or sandwiches from convenience stores, or cup-a-soups sent to me by my parents. It didn't take me long to figure out what had caused this change in my eating habits.

"It's all because of *Dendro*," I said.

All the food there was better than here in real life, as it had the strange powers unique to fantasy worlds.

To people familiar with RPGs, food was a thing that, for example, healed or raised stats — but in *Dendro*, a game which had taste, it didn't end there. There were foods and skills focused entirely on flavor, and restaurants built with certain construction skills gave a taste bonus to all food made inside. By stacking such effects, the popular establishments, according to Shu, could "easily surpass the fanciest places in real life."

Mind you, I didn't know how to feel about hearing *him* say that, considering he could easily surpass the enhanced *Dendro* restaurants by sense skill alone.

Recently, he'd called me to try his handmade candy, and it had been so good that I'd experienced some indefinable phenomenon called "taste inflation."

Back to the matter at hand... Basically, the food in *Dendro* was so good that it made real food feel lacking. I wasn't doing any cooking because I just hadn't felt that anything I could make would be worth the effort.

Lavish eating in Dendro, basic nutrition intake in real life... I've read about this online, I thought as I realized I was unintentionally following the so-called "*Dendro Diet*," popular among women and avid players.

"Mh..." I silently continued eating my spaghetti.

By all reasonable standards, it was good food, but it seemed to lack the power to overwhelm my taste buds.

...Let's try adding this Tabasco sauce and grated cheese, I decided.

"Ahh, I'm finally done with everything I had to do," said a woman sitting at a table behind me. "What a pain that was."

"Well done," said a man accompanying her.

There weren't many people in the cafeteria at this time of the day, so I could hear their conversation quite clearly.

"It must be nice to have all your stuff done long before the deadline, eh, Kage?" she continued. "You coulda shown me what you'd done, you know?"

"I consider schoolwork to be something you do by yourself,"

replied the man.

The woman had a Kansai accent, slightly Kyoto-like, while the man talked in a very polite manner.

Looks like college really is a place for people from all across the country, I thought.

Once done with my lunch, I went towards the cafeteria's exit and noticed the papers hung on a nearby bulletin board. Surprised that such an advanced college was still using something so archaic, I took a moment to look through it.

While most of the papers were about in-campus contacts and clubs, there were also some leaflets for part-time jobs. There seemed to be demand for cafeteria, shop workers, and even private tutors.

I was living fine on just my allowance right now, but I probably had to consider eventually getting a part-time job for extra income.

Well, perhaps I'll do it when I'm not as busy with Dendro as I am now, I thought as I walked out.



Once done with my college business, I went to buy some necessities and returned home a little past noon.

As I was handling what I'd bought, my mobile phone began to vibrate as someone called me. The display said that it was Mom, so I didn't hesitate to answer and bring the mobile phone to my ear.

"Hello? Reiji?" Sure enough, it was my mother, speaking to me with the same voice I'd heard yesterday.

"Hi, Mom. What's wrong?" I asked.

"The schedule says that it's the day of the last part of the enrollment process, and I was just wondering if you'd actually gone..."

Yeah, I expected as much, I thought.

My mom was highly prone to worrying, and didn't hesitate to call me on days when I had something going on. She'd also called me yesterday morning, saying "Today's the physical examination, isn't it? Are you ready for it?"

According to Shu, she had always been this much of a worrywart. I supposed I couldn't really blame her, considering she'd had my sister as her first child.

Ever since my sister was young, even her most basic antics had been outside the realm of reason. Just like in the various misadventures I'd recalled this morning, my sister had a tendency to get caught up in the most absurd of situations and make it through them using nothing but brute force, and because of this, our parents had had a really hard time with her.

To make things worse, Shu had been born soon after her, and though he wasn't as absurd a creature as our sister, he certainly wasn't

normal, either.

In his younger years, he'd entered showbiz and became both a child singer and actor. Later down the line, during his middle and high school years, he'd dabbled in martial arts and gone on to win Unkra. And when he'd started going to college, he'd casually picked up cooking and made food so good that it made people pass out.

Basically, he could do just about anything he tried.

As far as I was aware, the only exception to this was art. I recalled having looked at his "works" and thinking that I would probably have to be an alien creature for them to make even a bit of sense.

Anyway, having those two abnormals as their children must've been pretty taxing on my parents, and I could totally understand why they would worry about me, as well.

Still, compared to them... no, without any comparisons, I was as normal as people come, so they really didn't have to mind me all that much.

...Weird. An auditory hallucination bearing Nemesis's voice had just asked, "Does a normal person fight by eating undead flesh? What about punching people's faces with a charred arm? Is that normal?"

...Hey, I'm still more normal than my siblings, I replied silently.

"Reiji?" Mom spoke up in a worried tone, returning me to reality. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Uh, no, it's nothing," I said to calm her down. "I did all I had to before noon. It's all good. Now, I just have to wait for the opening the day after tomorrow."

Which was true. This year's April 1st, the day when the term would usually start, was a Saturday, so the event had been moved to Friday, March 31st. Still, it would be nothing but a guidance event, and the schedule said that the actual entrance ceremony would be held some time after college began.

I remembered finding it weird that the entrance ceremony would be separate from the actual entrance.

"Well, that's good to know," said Mom. "Your dad and I will come see you at the entrance ceremony. If you need anything, you can ask Shu for help. He's not far from you."

"Yeah, I know."

Shu said the same thing, I thought.

"But wow... my little Reiji is a college student. Time sure flies..." Though we were talking by phone, I could easily tell that she was turning sentimental. "You were such an easy child to raise... Well, I could say the same for Shu, but he was just *too* little trouble. Your sister, though..."

I could almost see her place her hand on her head as she recalled something. She was either remembering the same sister-related events

I was, or deeds that had happened before I was even born.

Unless...

“Did something happen to her again?” I asked.

“She called me from overseas yesterday and said, ‘I got caught up in a bomb terror plot in Val Verde. You might see my name on the news, but know that I’m perfectly fine. I even caught the one who set it up.’”

“Yikes...”

The fact that she’d caught the terrorist made it obvious that she hasn’t changed at all.

Wait, Val Verde...? She’s in South America again? I thought.

“Sometimes I wonder if she isn’t some sort of Superman or Terminator,” my mom added.

Considering my sister’s love for Western movies, that comparison was very much like her, but...

I told Mom, “Last I asked, she said, ‘Hospital examinations say that I’m an Earthling. Oh, and DNA tests support that, too, of course.’”

“That girl is just so...” my mom said and sighed. “I can understand Shu, since he’s a man without a steady job, but I’d really like to see your sister settle down soon. At this rate, she’ll enter her thirties without anything changing.”

“Well, you’d first need to find someone brave enough to bond with her,” I commented.

I certainly know I wouldn’t do it, even if we weren’t family, I thought.

“What about you, Reiji? Got any sweet stories to share?” Mom asked suddenly.

“...Eh?” I exclaimed, confused as to why the subject had switched to me.

“Have you gotten a girlfriend in college yet?”

“I’ve only been to the briefing and gone through the enrollment process,” I protested. “There’s no way I could have gotten one at this stage.”

In *Dendro*, I’d become acquainted with Liliana, Marie, and the duel ranker girls such as Juliet or Chelsea, but those were all just friends — far from the “girlfriend” Mom had in mind.

“What about food? Have you had a girl make lunch for you yet?”

“...Nope.”

Sure, Marie had made us a midnight snack while we were heading to Gideon. However, considering *the thing she’d made* to be food was an insult to all cooking everywhere, it didn’t count... surely.

“Have you at least gone for a drive with a girl?”

“I don’t even have a license to drive cars,” I retorted. “I have one for motorbikes, but I don’t have one of those here.”

Nemesis and I occasionally rode Silver, but riding a horse was

different from “driving,” so, again, it didn’t count.

“I see,” said Mom. “I just thought that you were the one best suited for love out of you three.”

“What? Wouldn’t that be Shu?”

As far as I knew, he was extremely popular among girls. I could clearly remember the loads of chocolates he’d brought home on Valentine’s Days when he was in high school.

“Well, he’s unemployed right now...”

“Ohh...”

True enough. These days, he was in *Dendro* around the clock, so he probably wasn’t as popular as he used to be. Or maybe he was and I just didn’t know about it? To my knowledge, he was only popular among children, and even then, only as nothing more than a bear-shaped jungle gym mascot thing.

“Oh, but Mom,” I argued, “Shu doesn’t have a job, but he has an income, right? I’m sure he’ll be popular with women who marry for money. It’s fine.”

“That seems like a problem in and of itself...”

...*Yeah, I realized that right after saying it*, I thought.

“Would I be asking for too much if I wanted to see a grandchild within the next ten years?” she asked.

“Well, Shu will be married before he closes in on his forties,” I answered. “Probably.”

“And your sister?”

“...” Deafening silence.

I’m sorry, Mom, I thought. I just can’t picture her ever getting married. That might be a possibility that would have to be seized from far, far beyond the radix point.



Duel city Gideon, Paladin, Ray Starling

After wrapping up my exchange with Mom, I logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

First things first: I checked the time and found out that it was right about three in the afternoon here.

As I did that, Nemesis left the crest.

“Are you done with your college business and whatnot?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I went through the last part of the procedure.”

Which means that, today and tomorrow, I can focus on Dendro entirely, I thought.

Then again, I’d start going to college soon after that... but that was something I could think about later.

“So, what shall we do today?” Nemesis asked. “The meeting with

Rook and Marie was tomorrow in this world's time, no?"

Being a party, we regularly went on various quests.

The particularly popular ones were those related to the Jeand Grasslands. The drastic change to the area had affected the local ecosystem, creating conditions that made new monsters come dangerously close to the city. Quests to cull the more threatening ones were becoming more common by the day.

We'd intended to go on such a quest today, but my business with college had ended unexpectedly quickly, giving me lots of free time.

I looked at my friends list and, sure enough, Rook and Marie weren't online.

"Well... I guess I'll pay a visit to the knight offices," I said.

"The usual business, I assume?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah."

When I came there, a worker greeted me and led me to the usual place, clearly used to doing this by now. We stood before a heavily sealed door as the worker used some spells to undo the seals.

Once beyond it, I was surrounded by a load of container-shaped inventories, all of which contained nothing but cursed items.

There were many ways weapons and armor could become cursed. Some got cursed due to the grudge of the dead; some were designed to be cursed by the Dark Knights using them; some were merely left behind by Hexers, a job focused entirely on cursing people and objects; some became cursed due to monster skills; et cetera, et cetera.

Though some curses could be lifted by the common clergyman from the priest job grouping, many were too strong for that, demanding the powers of skilled, max level tians — a rarity in the kingdom, and doubly so in Gideon, since most hardened clergymen were in the capital.

Another problem with cursed items was that they could neither be disposed of — since someone might find them and be subjected to the curse — or destroyed — since the cursed item might react to that by unleashing the curse. There was also the fact that these had once been good items, so people were somewhat reluctant to get rid of them.

Because of these reasons, the long years of "purify or store" handling had created this massive hoard of cursed items. Since the game had started and Masters had entered this world, resulting in an increase in high-level clergymen, the situation here had slowly gotten better, but the cursed items were still great in number.

Many of the items being held here had once been powerful pieces of equipment. Returning them to a usable state would give the people greater power while dealing with events like Franklin's Game or the wars to come, and because of this, Count Gideon had been pushing to get them uncursed.

But it had been going too slowly, and while they'd been wondering what to do, I'd received and uncursed the CBR Armor using my special reward.

The Count had somehow heard of this — likely from Elizabeth, who'd heard it from Marie — and sent me a request to undo the curses on the items here. I'd accepted, provided I wasn't bound to any schedule and could do it whenever I had free time.

Thus, I paid occasional visits to the offices and worked to undo the curses on the items here.

It took me about two hours to uncure a single inventory. That might seem like a long time, but clergymen had it even worse. Due to MP and cooldown limitations on their skills, they had to gradually purify items over the course of an entire day, while my Grudge-soaked Greaves did it much faster with me doing nothing but being close to the inventory. Still, it would be a pretty long time until I was done uncursing everything here.

"The equipment purification will take quite a while, I assume?" asked Nemesis.

"Well, they've spent many years hoarding these," I answered. "Just look around."

"So it's a great mess, even for Gouz-Maise the grudge vacuum."

"...Grudge vacuum? Well, that's pretty on-point."

Whatever the case, I was allowed to do this whenever I pleased, so could purify it all at my own leisure.

Hell, doing this was advantageous for me, too. After all, the MP and SP stored in the Grudge-soaked Greaves grew the more grudge it absorbed, and considering the chances of my wanting to use it in future battles, having more of it certainly wouldn't hurt.

The reward for this activity, by the way, wasn't monetary. For every ten inventories I purified, they let me pick any one of the purified weapons. These inventories contained sacred swords, mystic blades, and gem brands, and I was allowed to take any one of the ones I'd uncursed.

Considering that there might situations in the future in which I'd have to fight without Nemesis at my side, or with her helping me in human form, I figured that having a spare weapon was a good idea, and I hadn't hesitated to accept those conditions.

But alas...

"No good," said Nemesis. "This one is lacking, as well."

"Tsk..."

When I'd told her about the spare weaponry, Nemesis said that she wouldn't allow it unless the weapon passed her examination.

She was so strict that none of the ten weapons I'd purified so far had made the cut.

There were some really strong-looking blades, too, I thought.

“I still don’t see a single sword that passes!” she declared.

I knew she’d said, “I’ll have to make sure that it’s fully worthy!” but I’d certainly had no idea she would be so strict.

Does a weapon that passes her examination even exist? I thought to myself.



After purifying one inventory, I left the room, looked outside, and saw that it was evening. Once done reporting today’s results to the person in charge, I went out to the hallway...

“Oh?”

...and saw someone familiar — Liliana.

Her face was red, and she was talking to several people while looking somewhat anxious.

“So she’s no longer in Gideon,” she said before coughing loudly. “I do not think we couldn’t find her if she was anywhere in the city, so we can only assume she went outside...”

The people she was talking to were clad in navy blue shinobi clothing, and wore masks and plated headbands on their heads, making them look like the most standard of ninjas. These days, they weren’t an uncommon sight here in Gideon — you could see them jumping from rooftop to rooftop at noon and midnight alike.

The primary cause of these sightings was one of our party members: Marie.

Count Gideon was really bitter about his city being subjected to the horrors of the Gouz-Maise Gang and the terror of Franklin’s Game. Because of that, he’d decided that he had to be strong on policing and intelligence, leading him to ready his pocket money to set up an intelligence agency.

Since such a group would handle sensitive information, Count Gideon had wanted it to be made up of tians, rather than Masters, but there had been a significant lack of qualified people.

During the attack by a SUBM called the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, and the war that had come later, the kingdom had lost many of its battle-focused tians, leaving the country’s forces underleveled and underskilled. Most of the few capable tians were in the knight orders and other groups rooted in the capital. Thus, to form an intelligence agency that could double as police, the Count had first had to acquire the right people, and he’d chosen Marie to help him with this purpose.

After Franklin’s Game, Elizabeth had introduced her to the Count, and Marie had taken the opportunity to sell him the Jewels storing the monsters that only attacked Masters, which had gone on to be used to train and powerlevel tian knights.

She'd also revealed to him that she was the Superior Killer and the Death Shadow — the Superior Job of Tenchi's onmitsu grouping. Upon hearing that, the Count had wondered if he could use Marie's connections to hire some Tenchi ninjas for his intelligence agency, since they were known to be highly capable operatives.

Marie had accepted his request and contacted the Tenchi ninja group she was still connected to, which was the shinobi village where she got her onmitsu jobs, apparently.

As luck would have it, a civil war in Tenchi had destroyed their employer's household and left them wandering, searching for a new boss.

Count Gideon's wants and the ninja group's wants had matched perfectly, and soon enough, the entire village had moved to the city.

"Soon enough" was a bit of an understatement, actually, considering they'd come all the way here from Tenchi — the other side of the continent — in less than a week's time. It was a speed impossible for most Masters, let alone tians, and naturally, the Count had been absolutely dumbfounded.

When he'd asked about it, however, they'd merely said, "It's a trade secret. Nin-nin," in a manner as questionable as it was ninja-like. Apparently, not even Marie knew how they'd pulled it off.

Whatever the case, true to their reputation, the ninjas were highly skilled.

Tenchi, the land where the Gideon Shinobi Force had originated, was known as the country with the strongest tians. For Tenchi's battle-focused tians, reaching level 500 was more like a starting point than anything else, since they would then begin to hone their techniques until they became true martial artists worthy of the name. Because of this and other reasons, Tenchi was often referred to as the "land of strife."

Luckily or unluckily, depending on your perspective, the country's current state was much like that of Japan during the Sengoku Era, so almost none of their great power was directed toward other countries.

It's not like a constant civil war is all that better, but still, I thought.

Anyway, the highly stereotypical ninjas were all max level stalwarts, making them simply perfect for the job. Count Gideon had quickly hired them and set up the Gideon Shinobi Force, an information agency answering directly to him. And thus, we now had a Rome-like city in which ninjas were a common sight.

Also, Marie had made big bank for her role as mediator, and she'd gone on to treat us to some food.

So yeah, the ninjas were a normal part of Gideon by now, but Liliana's panicked expression as she talked to them certainly wasn't.

"We will split up and search Gideon's surroundings," said one of

the ninjas.

"Please do so," replied Liliana and coughed yet again. "I'll join you soon."

"Do not overdo it."

The ninjas kicked the floor beneath, dashed away, and vanished like shades in sunlight.

"Ah, Ray!" Liliana cried as she saw us nearby, again looking somewhat anxious.

"Are you okay, Liliana?" I asked.

Her pallid expression made it evident that she wasn't in good health.

"Oh, don't mind me," she said and coughed again. "Her Highness escaped today. Have you seen her, perchance?"

She showed little intention to answer my question, instead revealing that she was caught up in more Elizabeth-related trouble.

"...No," I said, shaking my head in response.

The kingdom's second princess was a very free and brazen character, as well as a genius escape artist. Though she refrained from doing it on days with official business, her leaving the Gideon residence she was staying at had become a nearly daily occurrence by this point.

The fact that she was able to escape while being observed by the Royal Guard and several max level ninjas spoke volumes about the extent of her skill. It was hard to believe she was just a child who didn't even have a single job.

...Well, the primary reason why Elizabeth had become so good at escaping was the coaching from Rook, who, for reasons unknown, had been trained in such things in real life.

Our party is full of eccentrics, I thought.

"And you're no exception," Nemesis commented telepathically.

...I can't really deny that.

"Well... I know I probably shouldn't say this, but isn't that a common thing at this point?" I asked Liliana.

"Indeed it is." She nodded. "But things are slightly different this time."

"In what way?"

Elizabeth had sneaked out, and the officials had gone out to find her. What could be different there?

"A short time ago, as a countermeasure against her antics, we gave Her Highness a Jewel."

Jewels were items that allowed the storage of tamed monsters that obeyed their owners. Even if they couldn't fit the monsters into their minion capacity, children and low-level humans could use them by putting them in party slots.

"I see," I said. "Since you can't prevent her from escaping, you decided to give her a means to protect herself." As far as safety was concerned, that was perfectly reasonable.

"Yes," Liliana said and coughed again. "Count Gideon used his connections to procure a Pure-Dragon and presented it to her."

"Well, that's something..."

Their rarity on the market made Pure-Dragons quite a luxury. While Demi-Dragons went for about 1,000,000 lir, Pure-Dragons were often over ten times more expensive.

I figured the Count hadn't hesitated to fork up the money for something so costly because he'd felt responsible about Elizabeth getting kidnapped during Franklin's Game.

But man, Count Gideon sure is rich, I thought.

He'd rewarded the Masters, given money to the families of those that'd died, paid for city repairs, created the Gideon Shinobi Force, and he'd still had more funds to spend. His wealth might've been another reason why Franklin had picked Gideon as his target city.

"And, well... the Pure-Dragon's name is 'Stealth Dragon,'" Liliana added.

"Oh, 'Stealth Dragon,' eh?" I said. "Wait... *Stealth?*"

I have a bad feeling about this.

"Stealth Dragons have the ability to hide themselves and the people riding them," she explained.

...I more or less see how it is.

She went on, "Count Gideon assumed that this quality would make it an optimal bodyguard, since it could hide Her Highness and take her away from trouble, but..."

"...it was also an optimal escape partner," I finished her sentence.

The escape artist princess had been given the perfect ally: a monster that was basically a huge, flying Marie. Sure, it didn't have Arc-en-Ciel, but that wouldn't stop it from being stupidly troublesome.

"Yes." Liliana nodded. "We've been searching for Her Highness and the Stealth Dragon ever since they disappeared in the morning, but we can't find them anywhere in Gideon, so we assume that they might've left the city."

"That's... plausible," I said.

Among the ninjas, there were many people from the onmitsu grouping, just like Marie. That grouping excelled at both hiding and finding hidden things, so if they'd had no luck finding Elizabeth in Gideon, it was likely that she'd gone outside the city.

Thanks to the Gideon Shinobi Force, the city was now considerably more peaceful and safer. However, the same couldn't be said for the city's monster-ridden outskirts. Even if you had a Pure-Dragon bodyguard, this was a world where you could easily be

ambushed by something even more powerful.

“I had the Gideon Shinobi Force extend their search to the outside of the city,” said Liliana as she walked towards the exit. “I’m about to join them and—”

She cut her words short and coughed so heavily that she staggered.

It had been bothering me ever since I’d seen her today. The red face, the coughs — it was clear that she was ill.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Do you have a Cold?”

“...Yes, but it’s just a normal Cold, rather than the Epidemic they had in the capital.”

In *Dendro*, illnesses were classified as disease-based debuffs. However, unlike the basic poisons and the like, they could be significantly more troublesome, as many of them couldn’t be removed by your standard Elixirs or Antidotes.

The Food Poisoning I’d once gotten had disappeared after I’d taken just one drug, but there were Epidemics that could only be cleared by healing skills from Superior Jobs. Alas, not everyone had access to people with such skills, so most had to settle for slowly healing themselves with medicine made by people in the doctor grouping, simply waiting for the illness to go away, or...

“Liliana,” I said slowly. “Have you met with Her Majesty before she ran away today?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “But she disappeared soon afterwards...”

I’m starting to see what’s going on here, I thought.

“All right, I’ll search for her, too. But you have to stay in Gideon and rest.”

“But I...!”

“Leave it to me,” I said while looking her in the eyes. She momentarily hesitated before giving me a light nod.

“Very well,” she said. “I leave Her Majesty to you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find her no matter what.” I nodded confidently and left the knight offices.

[Quest Received: Search — Elizabeth S. Altar, Difficulty 5]

[Confirm the quest details in the quest window]

The message I received was highly reminiscent of an event I’d experienced a month ago.



After leaving the offices, I took Silver out of my inventory and jumped on him, and as I made my prosthetic left arm hold the reins, Nemesis climbed up behind me. Then I activated Silver’s Wind Hoof

skill and dashed through the air towards my destination.

“You know where to find Elizabeth, Ray?” asked Nemesis.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m almost completely certain that she went out to look for a food that works on Colds.”

Dendro had loads of foods that made people healthy, and some of them were effective against Colds. One such food were Clearberries — a type of berry often found in the areas surrounding Gideon. However, Clearberries also weakened the symptoms of the Epidemic that had attacked the capital recently, so most of Gideon’s Clearberries had been sent there. Alejandro had told me that the storage was completely empty.

This morning, when she’d seen Liliana suffering from a Cold, Elizabeth had clearly wanted to do something about it and decided to get her some Clearberries. And if she hadn’t found any of them in Gideon’s shops, it was entirely possible that she’d used her mount-bodyguard to go forage for them directly.

“Well, she’s a proactive girl, after all,” said Nemesis.

Thanks to a quest I’d done not long ago, I knew where I could find Clearberries. They grew in the area southwest of Gideon, the Saudade Woods.

“The monsters there aren’t particularly high level, so it’s not too dangerous,” said Nemesis. “A little girl with a Pure-Dragon at her side should fare just fine, no?”

“The monsters there *were* below Demi-Dragon-tier, so it *wasn’t* too dangerous,” I replied, emphasizing certain words.

“...Past tense, eh?”

“Yeah. Things are different now.”

Following Franklin’s Game, the ecosystem in Gideon’s surroundings had slowly begun to change. The most noticeable difference was that the more powerful monsters that had once lived farther away had started coming closer to the city.

When I’d been searching for quests to take with my party, I’d learned that the southwestern woods was now a habitat for Pure-Dragon-tier monsters and above.



Southwest of Gideon, Saudade Woods

In the middle of Saudade Woods, there was a girl and a Pure-Dragon.

“Phew, this should be more than enough!” The second princess of the Kingdom of Altar, Elizabeth S. Altar, nodded in a satisfied manner while looking at a basket full of Clearberries.

“KYULULU.” The white Pure-Dragon with rabbit-like fur released a voice, as if agreeing with its owner. It was a Stealth Dragon called

“Kyululu” — named so by Elizabeth because of the sound it made.

“Let’s go back, then,” said Elizabeth. “It’s already evening. If we don’t come back now, they might start to worry.”

Little did she know that they were already worried. The girl’s standards regarding this were quite unlike those of the people responsible for her.

Elizabeth climbed up on Kyululu’s back and, just like when they’d arrived here, had it use Optic Camouflage and Presence Block to hide them both and leave the Saudade Woods.

Kyululu spread its wings, ready to take flight...

“Kyu?!”

It jumped to the side in surprise. A moment later, something large broke through the surface and burst out of the ground.

“SHAAAAAAH...”

It was a large monster bearing the head of a cobra-like snake and many centipede-like legs.

It bent its head and looked directly at Kyululu and Elizabeth as though Optic Camouflage had no effect at all.

“Wh-What?!” Elizabeth cried.

“KYULULULU!”

As Elizabeth got frightened, Kyululu began jumping away from the monster, careful to not throw the girl off.

The snake-head creature went after Kyululu with a precision so great, it was scary.

“Kyululu! Can’t you fly?!” shouted Elizabeth in desperation.

“KYULULU...!”

Despite having wings capable of flight, Kyululu was running on land. Its instincts were telling it that flying would instantly kill them both.

The monster chasing them was a Viperhead Dragon Worm. It was a Pure-Dragon-tier monster bearing Poison, the worm-like ability to dig underground, and the snake-like skill called “Heat Perception.”

It was much like thermography, and it allowed the creature to see Kyululu despite its Optic Camouflage.

“SHAAAAAAH!”

Though Kyululu was a Pure-Dragon, too, its focus on camouflage and surprise attacks made it have relatively low stats.

The Viperhead Dragon Worm not only had greater stats, but it also nullified Kyululu’s prime merit, Optic Camouflage, by using its Heat Perception.

The creature was basically the Stealth Dragon’s natural predator.

Its only way out of this predicament was to fly, but it would all be over if the Viperhead spat its Poison over Kyululu when it stopped to take flight. It had to increase the distance between them, but the

creature was gaining on it with frightening precision.

Soon enough, the Viperhead's poisonous fangs reached for Elizabeth, but then...

"Counter Absorption!"

...a barrier of light appeared in the creature's way.

"Eh?" the girl exclaimed in confusion.

"KYULU...?" the Stealth Dragon cried as it and its owner both tried to turn around and see what caused the crashing sound behind them.

"Don't turn around! Just run! Get some distance, fly, and get out of here!"

Urged by the loud order, they both looked forward and continued running.

Kyululu quickly created the necessary distance and flew up into the sky.

That was when Elizabeth turned around for the first time.

There, she saw a dark-red knight on a silver horse fighting the snake-headed insectoid.



Paladin, Ray Starling

Upon hearing dragon wings flutter behind me, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was uncomfortably close," said Nemesis.

"Seriously." I couldn't help but agree. I dreaded to imagine what would've happened if I'd been just a second late, and I was really glad I'd made it.

"Now, we just have to do something about this snake-head," Nemesis added.

"True."

The snake-head before me — a "Viperhead Dragon Worm," apparently — seemed to be quite irritated. I could only assume it was upset about me getting in the way and letting its Pure-Dragon feast escape.

It threatened me with snake-like movements and sounds.

"Well? Should we escape it?" asked Nemesis.

"We saved the princess, but if a monster like this lives near Gideon, it might eventually kill someone else," I answered.

And that would leave a bad taste in my mouth, so...

"...we'll kill it," I finished aloud. "Here and now."

"Understood!"

Thus began the battle.

"SHAAAAAAH!" Treating us as enemies to be killed, rather than prey to be eaten, the snake-head opened its mouth, not for a bite, but

to release a Poison breath. The green smoke buried my vision and afflicted me with Poison, which quickly drained my HP.

“Form Shift — The Flag Halberd!” I shouted.

And so, the damage was reversed.

Right as Nemesis became a halberd, I activated Like a Flag Flying the Reversal, the skill that reversed the effects of debuffs. With that, the Poison began healing me.

The snake-head, surprised by me still standing strong upon taking its Poison, slightly backed away from me.

Not missing the opening, I held my right hand in front and made my Miasmaflame Bracer release its Hellish Miasma while also activating Silver’s Wind Hoof barrier to protect me from the three debuffs.

The monster was staggered. It had a resistance to Poison, but Weakness and Intoxication worked on it just fine.

“The stage is set,” I said. “Let’s go, Nemesis!”

“Certainly!”

My strategy was the same as with Gardranda. I repeatedly let it damage me and healed myself with the reversed Poison, accumulating the damage needed to end it with a well-placed Vengeance is Mine.

It was safe to assume that, unlike the demon, this one wouldn’t turn more powerful once I took its head.

“Still, even though it’s Weakened, its stats are far higher than yours,” said Nemesis. “Mess up one time too many, and you might die.”

“True,” I said, acknowledging that my own stats were equal to or less than Demi-Dragon-tier. “Our chances of winning are about... forty percent?”

“Ha ha ha! Forty percent, you say?” she laughed. “That’s much higher than any of our previous encounters!”

“Damn right!”

Recalling the battles we’d gone through, we charged towards the enemy.

With Silver as my steed and Nemesis in hand, I clashed with a creature far stronger than myself.

Just like we’d done before, and just like we would be doing from this point onward, we struggled against adversity while reaching for the possibility we wanted to seize.

As the enemy’s fangs ripped into me, as my blade sunk into the enemy, as I narrowly avoided death from its lethal attacks, and as its unexpected actions caught me off guard, we continued fighting until the end.

And so, after an hour-long battle...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...we launched an attack that obliterated its head.



After the battle, we returned to Gideon.

“...Man, am I tired,” I sighed.

“That’s only natural,” said Nemesis. “You’ve been fighting for so long.”

The Poison I’d received had gone away with just a healing item, but sadly, the exhaustion wasn’t so easy to get rid of. I hauled my somewhat-heavy body through the city’s streets.

“Still, I’m glad Elizabeth’s okay,” I said.

After killing the monster, I’d gone to the knight offices to see whether she’d made it back safely, and found her being scolded by Liliana.

They’d decided that the Pure-Dragon she’d used to escape — “Kyululu,” apparently — would have its ownership switched to another person. Elizabeth would still be allowed to keep it as a pet, but that was it. The knights looking after her would take turns owning Kyululu until it was clear that she wouldn’t escape anymore.

The scene reminded me of the times my mom had confiscated a toy when I was a child.

Though Elizabeth was sad about being scolded, she seemed to understand that she’d deserved it for making Liliana and the others so worried, so she definitely wasn’t a bad girl.

Also, the moment when Elizabeth fearfully presented Liliana with a basket full of Clearberries, bringing Liliana to the verge of tears, left a pretty big impression on me.

“This is very much a happy ending,” said Nemesis.

“Yep. Glad it all worked out.”

But man, a quest from Liliana where I look for a girl and fight a worm...

It was just like the first quest I’d done upon starting *Dendro*.

In the first battle, the one in which Nemesis and I had first met, I’d faced a Demi-Dragon Worm and narrowly seized the possibility with Nemesis at my side. And today, Nemesis and I had fought a monster far stronger and still ended up seizing the possibility.

It felt somewhat easier than the first time, though, I thought.

“That’s because you’ve grown since then,” said Nemesis.

I’d changed quite a bit during my month in this world, but I didn’t think that me becoming stronger was the biggest difference. The biggest difference was that I’d had Nemesis with me right from the start this time.

On my first day, I’d protected Milia until I was beaten to a pulp, had to beg for a possibility, and had Nemesis answer. Today, Nemesis

had supported me right from the start, and if that wasn't the biggest difference, I didn't know what was.

Hm... I silently pondered.

It was likely that, just like everything before now and just like today, I'd be at the center of many various incidents. Some might be far worse, more intense, or scarier than any of the ones before. But...

"Hm? Why are you looking at me like that?" Nemesis asked.

"No reason..."

No matter what came my way, I felt that I could overcome it as long as I was with my partner. Thus, my everyday life would go on with Nemesis and me clearing all the trouble we get caught up in.

"Anyway, it's late," I said. "Should we go get something to eat?"

"Certainly," said Nemesis. "The snake-head's Coffers contained nothing but items you convert into money, so let's use that new wealth to have a feast!"

"...Don't overdo it, though."

And so, Nemesis and I walked through the late evening streets.

The End

Afterword



Bear: “Time fur the afterword! It’s me again! Brother Bear, AKA Shu Starling!”

Cat: “I’m Cheshiiire! The one who seeks to get a turn in these wastelands of the afterwordd!”

Xun: “What the hell Are ‘wastelands of thE afterword’...? I’m XunyU.”

Cat: “Anyway, like I said in the midword, this is the end of the first part of *Dendro*.”

Bear: “We only clawed our way this far thanks to our dear readers.”

Cat: “Indeed. The work’s popularity allowed us to complete the first part without having to force it into fewer than the necessary five volumes.”

Xun: “You mentionED in the midword that the authOr had a few spare pages he could use to add moreE story, right?”

Cat: “Yes. The short story even portrays some of Ray’s real life.”

Xun: “Now that I think abOUt it, he’s been online throUghout pretty much the whole of the story sO far.”

Bear: “He was only offline before logging in for the first time and after he got his first death penalty.”

Cat: “Yes, and since the work is in the VRMMO genre, the author figured that having some real life scenes was important, as well, so he went and wrote that short story. VRMMOs wouldn’t be VRMMOs if actual reality didn’t exist and the differences weren’t there for all to see!”

Xun: “...Still, a cErtain someone is a bit too differeNt.”

Bear: “Who do you mean?”

Xun: “The one who got an illustration in the short story.”

Bear: “Ohh...”

Cat: “The author was really surprised when Editor K told him that she would get an illustration.”

Bear: “Abearently, this was done at the request of Taiki.”

Xun: “Well, she sure is pOpular...”

Cat: “Please continue supporting Mr. Franklin — the one bearing the face of a mad scientist (*Dendro*) and of a cool beauty (real life).”

Xun: (...I’m not sUre if many people want to suppoRt her.)

Bear: “Now, it’s time for the usual serious comment from the author.”

Thank you very much for reading *Infinite Dendrogram*’s fifth volume and completing the first arc of the series. We’ve only made it this far thanks to you — our readers.

At the time I’m writing this, it was recently announced that *Infinite Dendrogram* got first place in BookWalker’s New Light Novel Awards 2017. According to Editor K, this was mostly due to votes from readers and bookstore employees. You have my sincere thanks for the result and for letting me complete the first part with little trouble.

The upcoming sixth volume would mark the start of the second arc, but we are also considering releasing a short story collection, as well.

New characters, new happenings, new battles — it would bring me great joy if you continued to enjoy and look out for the ever-heating story of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Cat: “Anyway, with the author’s comment done, it’s time to announce the next volume...”

Bear: “You do it, Cheshire.”

Cat: “Eh?”

Xun: “You’ve wanted tO do this for a while, so go foR it. Wrap up the first aRc.”

Cat: “...Thanks, you guys. All right, here I go! Volume si—”

?: “Volume six is set to come out at the end of 2017! (In Japan)!”

Cat: “Eh? Ehh?!”

Bear: “Some beary jaunty individual just stole your

announcement...”

Xun: “...Oh, it’s thE person who made a brief appearance in the secOnd short story.”

Cat: “Hngh... AAAAHH! YOU THIEVING CAT!”

Bear, Xun: (You’re the cat here, dude...)

?: “So yeah, look forward to volume six and my proper first appearance!”

Bonus Short Stories

The Royal Capital, Altea

The day after Mr. Franklin's terrorist incident in duel city Gideon, the Superior from Huang He, Xunyu, returned to the kingdom's capital at a speed unimaginable to the common person.

Unlike when she had gone to Gideon, she didn't have Meihai with her. The Huang He ambassador had more business in the duel city, and she was also thoroughly averse to Xunyu's method of travel, going as far as to tearily beg the Superior not to take her.

No one could fault her. Xunyu traveled by extending her Superior Embryo, Tenaga Ashinaga, into the distant horizon at supersonic speeds, then grabbing the surface and pulling herself towards it just as fast. To her, it was as natural as walking normally, but anyone forced to accompany her would turn groggy from the repeating decreases and increases in speed.

Upon arriving to the capital's gates, Xunyu took off her Superior Embryo. By design, Tenaga Ashinaga was like a set of complex claw grabbers and circus stiltwalker stilts, so it wasn't hard to remove.

With that done, she walked, on her own two feet, towards the state guest house in the noble district. She proved her identity to the guardsmen at the entrance, headed for her destination room, knocked on the door, and was welcomed inside.

"I'm bAck, Cang," she said upon entering.

"Welcome back, Master Xunyu!" a boy greeted her with a smile. He was Canglong, the current owner of the room and the third prince of the Huang He Empire.

"How'rE you holdin' up?" she asked.

"I still have a bit of a fever, but it's nothing major. What about you, Master Xunyu? There was some trouble in Gideon after the Clash, wasn't there? It was projected in the capital's sky."

"So it seEms."

Franklin had made sure that the incident at Gideon would be broadcasted to both Gideon and the capital. It was still the talk of the town here in Altea, and many tians were worried that something similar could happen here.

That was the reason why Xunyu had removed her Tenaga Ashinaga from sight upon entering the city. While wearing her

Embryo, she had the appearance of a fiend with limbs far too long for any humanoid creature, and the sight of such a being hopping around was sure to make the tians uneasy.

Fiendish and odd as she sometimes seemed, Xunyu was a girl (ten years old, by the way) who was capable of such consideration.

“Well, I’m finE,” she said. “All I hAd to do was take care of a single mOnster.”

“I see. That’s good to know,” Cang sighed with relief. “Oh, right, Master Xunyu, how was the Clash of the Superiors? Was the kingdom’s duel champion... was Figaro strong?”

“YeAh. Figaro was toUgh and I had tons of fun. I’d love tO fight him many more times while I’m here in thE kingdom,” she said with a smile that was plain to see even with the talisman covering her face.

Oh, it must have been a really great duel, thought Canglong upon seeing her expression.

“Master Xunyu, could you tell me more about the fight?” he requested. “The incident made it all chaotic, and I have yet to hear many details of the duel.”

“Of coursE,” said Xunyu. “That’s whY I returned here, aftER all.”

Indeed, she had come back to the capital specifically to show this boy that she was all right and tell him of the duel that he was certainly curious about.

“Before the stArt of the fight, to get fired up, stir up the sCEne, and set up a trap, I built myself up as the heEl. Then, I...”

And so she spoke, telling Canglong the details of the exciting new memory.

A certain day after Franklin’s Game, Nemesis

Ray arrived at the knight offices in Gideon and began uncursing the items there. This was quickly becoming a part of his daily routine.

Naturally, I was at his side, examining the weapons he had freed from their spells.

As I silently eyed the items, I became painfully aware that, as weaponry, they were far stronger than I was. Not only were their bonuses to attack power far greater than mine, but some also increased other stats, gave new skills, or even dealt elemental damage.

Comparing myself to them might’ve been foolish, considering that they were all things like named blades, demonbrands, and sacred swords, even though they’d been cursed, while I was merely a second form Embryo. Even so, the very idea of having to choose any of them to be Ray’s weapon gave me a heartache. It made me picture a world in which he saw me as weak and became more distant.

I’d rejected the idea of him taking new weapons and acted as

though they had to be “examined,” and now I couldn’t help but admit that it was nothing but an act of jealousy.

Still, I couldn’t keep rejecting them for such a superficial reason. For Ray’s sake, I had to pick him a suitable weapon.

With that in mind...

“Ray, if I may ask, what are your preferences when it comes to weapons?” I asked.

“My preferences?” he raised an eyebrow.

“I believe I should consider more than just its attributes when picking your reward. Your tastes are important, as well.”

No matter how powerful the weapon, it would mean little if he didn’t like it.

“Well...” he said and took a moment to think before continuing. “I’d like it to be black, considerably long... and I prefer blades over blunt weapons.”

“Hm?” I was highly familiar with a weapon that fit those conditions perfectly.

It was none other than myself. Both the Black Blade of my first form and the Flag Halberd of my second form were right up his alley.

“Is that all?” I asked. “Some people like weapons that release fire, lightning, and such. Don’t you have any preferences like that?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“But the conditions you gave make it seem like you’re satisfied with me.”

“Oh, right. Guess that means you’re just my type.”

...

“...UEH?!”

Eh? L... Huh!? W-W-W-W-Wait...! What?!

“What’s wrong?” Ray asked. “You look pretty red. Are you sick...? Does the Epidemic affect Embryos, too?”

“N-No! I’m fine! I’m perfectly fine!”

Calm down! Compose yourself, Nemesis! I told myself. He’s only saying that I’m his preferred type of weapon... definitely not that he likes me as a woman!

A-All right, I pulled myself together.

“Still... so I’m your ideal weapon, am I?”

“Marie told me that Embryos naturally take shapes and abilities befitting their Master’s wavelength. You’re born from my personal traits, after all. It’s no surprise we’re compatible.”

“I see... That means I’m the best partner you could ask for!”

“Damn right. We’re companions. Keep looking out for me, will you?”

“...Of course!”

This was a real weight off my mind. I actually had nothing to be

afraid of. No matter what weapons Ray would use from now on, I would be his only partner.

So now, as the proud bearer of this title, I had to choose a weapon that would make Ray more powerful than ever!

Thus, free of the gloom from before, I faced numerous weapons and began examining them with an eye keener and stricter than ever.



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